



ALDBOROUGH ROMAN TOWN PROJECT
2021 EXCAVATION
INTERIM REPORT

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EXCAVATIONS AT ALDBOROUGH (ISURIUM BRIGANTUM) 2021 INTERIM REPORT

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Summary

Excavation was carried out between the 27th August –26th September 2021 as part of the Aldborough Roman Town Project (University of Cambridge) close to the North Gate of Isurium Brigantum. A trench covering an area of 166m² was excavated, to continue work begun in 2019 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.

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 of 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 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 excavation (Ferraby and Millett 2020b) revealed much more than we had anticipated. The 1924 excavation had been less intrusive than we had expected, whilst our excavation revealed both a good late Roman – early medieval sequence as well as deep and well preserved earlier deposits, including a second-century blacksmith’s workshop. It was not possible to get to the bottom of the sequence in the time available, so it was planned to complete the work in 2020. However, the Covid pandemic delayed the resumption to the work until late August–September 2021.

Following the success of the initial excavation, the 2021 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 characterize the 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 (second- and first- century) buildings, with a particular focus on (i) better understanding the character of the earliest phases of the town’s development, and (ii) 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 was located in the same position as the 2019 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 2020).

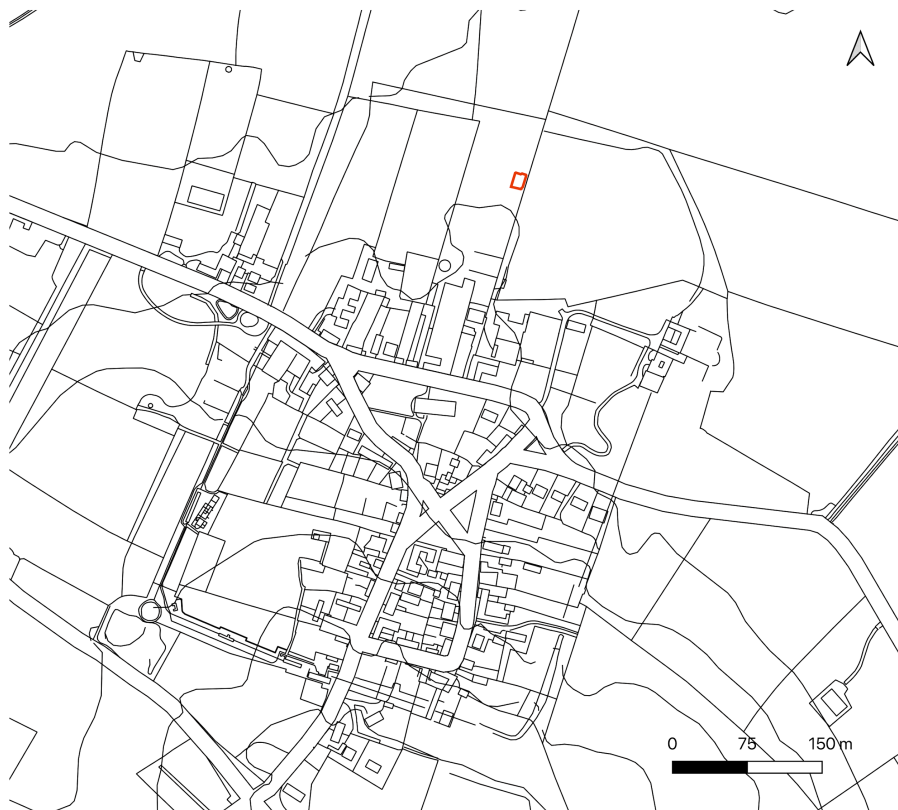


Figure 1: Location of the trench in relation to the OS map.

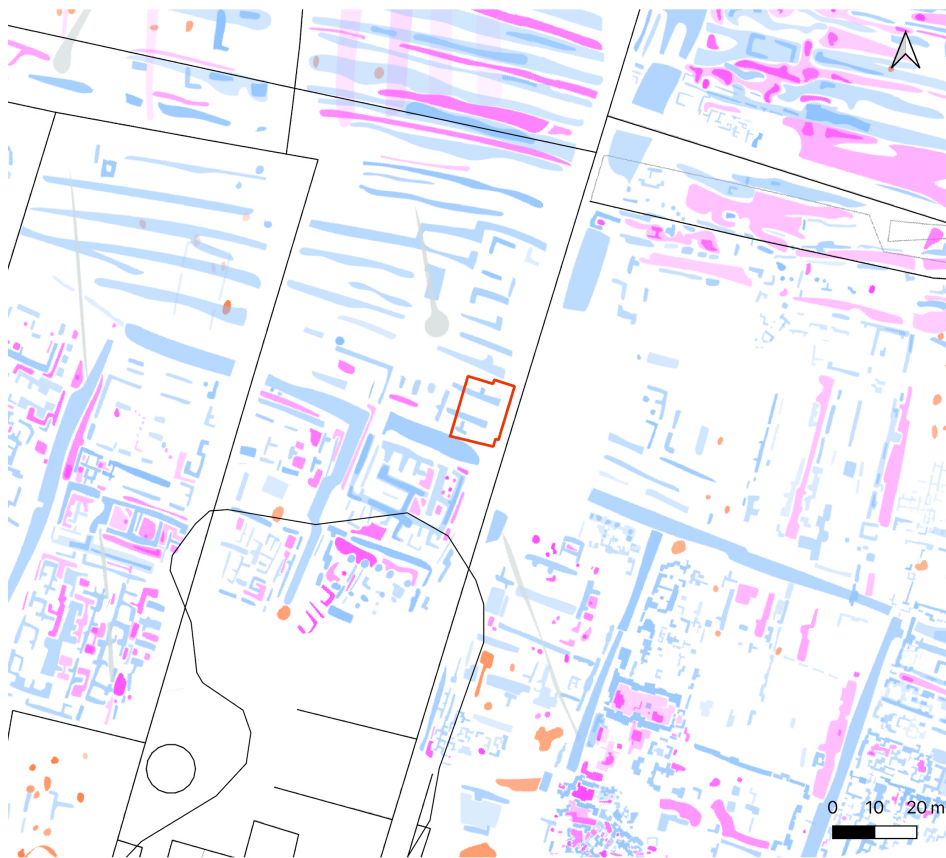


Figure 2: Location of the trench in the northern area of the Roman Town, showing the OS map and interpretation of the magnetometry survey.

Methods

The area excavated in 2019 was re-opened (by machine) down to the levels previously reached (that had been covered by straw prior to backfilling). The area was also extended by 1m (though hand excavation) to the north and east in order to create a safety step to allow for the investigation of the deeper deposits.

In 2019, the central part of the area was left unexcavated below the topsoil with two strips to the north and south taken down to the late Rome surface, and a strip to the east excavated to the earlier Roman deposits. In 2021 three areas were the focus of excavation:

- (a) the late sequence of deposits in the central area that were unexcavated in 2019,
- (b) the section cut through the building sequence on the eastern side of the trench which was widened and extended to further examine the blacksmith's workshop, and
- (c) a section was cut across 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 2019 excavation and a block of soil from the blacksmith's area was lifted for excavation in the laboratory. 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 results of the excavation were extremely good, with a great deal of new evidence produced. The work also produced a large volume of finds, mostly from the latest phases of occupation. The analysis of this material seems likely to add a wealth of new detail to our understanding of this period. However, in terms of the aims outlined above, we were unable to reach the bottom of the sequence because of the complexity of the stratigraphy. On this basis, we are planning a further season to finish excavation in this area in 2022.

In the three areas examined, the excavation revealed a wealth of new evidence but this only marginally alters the phasing established in 2019. On this basis the description below follows that phasing, explaining the evidence that complements the results of the first season. This text has been prepared before the analysis of the pottery from 2021, and thus uses the chronology from the 2019 excavation which is likely to be refined as work on the archive progresses.



Figure 4: Final view of 2021 excavation. (Photogrammetry: Dominic Powlesland)

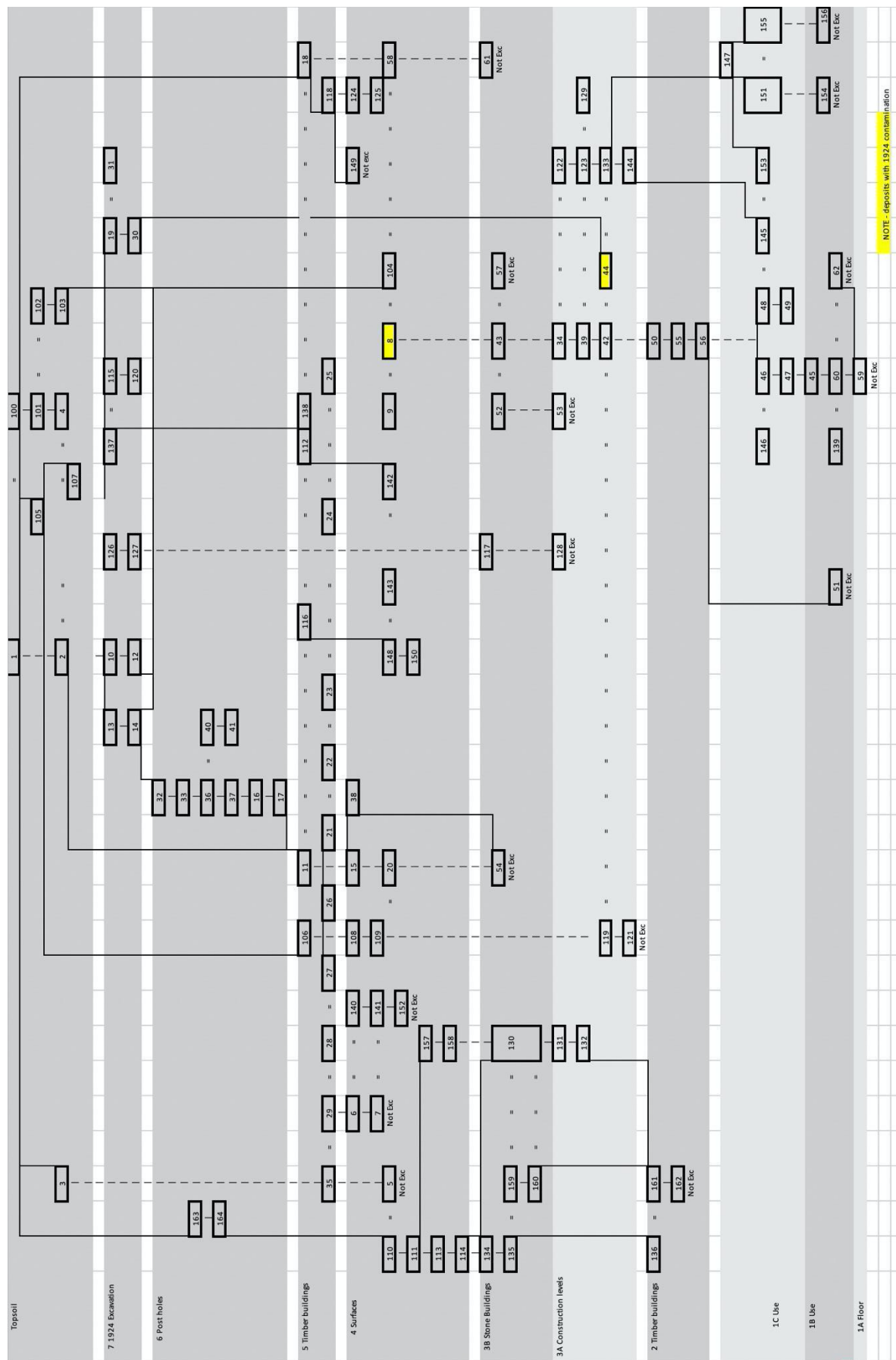


Figure 5: 2019 and 2021 site matrix

Phased description

Periods 1 and 2 – Blacksmith's Workshop/Timber Buildings

See Figure 6



Figure 6: Periods One and Two in the 2021 excavation

The area examined in 2019 was extended, but constraints on time meant that it was not possible to excavate beneath the floor. A block sample from the laminated floor deposits was lifted for laboratory analysis and the spatial patterning of hammerscale was mapped at two levels by Elizabeth La Duc. Her analysis of the slag confirms that smithing was the main activity with no evidence for smelting having yet been identified. The intensive use of coal is also being studied in the hope of discovering more about its source.

The feature identified as part of a stone-built furnace in the 2019 excavation was further examined, and now appears to have been part of a partition wall constructed during the use of smithy. The line of this wall was continued to the south by a further foundation which is itself aligned with the timber slots assigned to Period 2. This suggests a more complex sequence than previously concluded, with a phase of subdivision of space within the workshop, and a more continuous development with the buildings ascribed to Period 2 in 2019.

The lowest surface reached in the street section cut at the southern edge of the trench was at approximately the same level as the upper part of the sequence in the blacksmith's workshop and has been provisionally equated with Period 2.

Period 3 Stone buildings

See Figure 7

The western extension of the cutting to explore the blacksmith's workshop revealed a complex sequence in the make-up levels beneath the Period 3 stone building. These deposits included evidence for a hearth and rake-out deposits presumably associated with its construction phase. These deposits were overlain by the remains of a stone flagged floor and an adjacent north-south wall which was not further investigated.



Figure 7: Period 3 in the 2021 excavation (Photogrammetry: Dominic Powlesland)

Immediately to the south of the blacksmith's workshop area, we confirmed the presence of a major east–west wall noted in 2019 that had been robbed to the base of its foundation trench and had also been disturbed by the 1924 excavation. On the south side of this robbed wall we began the investigation of a sequence of deposits that had formed the make-up for the floor of the building. These comprised dump deposits some of which were very rich in finds. At the southern limit of this area were the vestiges of a stone flagged floor overlying the dumps and defining the southern side of the interior of the building.

The adjacent wall had been robbed to the west, but remained *in situ* to the east beside our cutting through the street to the south. This wall was well built and very substantial, 1.0m wide and set in a deep foundation trench with herring-bone masonry at its foot. A sequence of street surfaces had accumulated against the southern face of the wall, suggesting a long period of occupation.

Other elements of the Period 3 building were glimpsed through the later rubble deposits in the area to the west, again indicating a substantial and long-lived building with several phases of alteration. It is hoped that these will be better understood after a further season of excavation in 2022.



Figure 8: Section through the street and east-west wall of the period 3 stone building (facing north-west). (Photo: Rose Ferraby)

Periods 4, 5 and 6 Surfaces, Timber buildings and Post holes

See Figure 9

The well-made cobbled surface of Period 4 exposed in 2019 was partially removed in the cutting along the eastern edge of the trench, revealing a substantial foundation above the floor

make-up for the Period 3 building which had clearly been demolished with the bulk of the flooring removed. At this stage the southern wall of the building was also largely robbed out down to foundation level. The section cut through the street to the south revealed a final gravel surface that had been laid over the infilled robber trench. This seems likely to have been laid some time after its infilling, most likely in Period 5.

Across the central area of the excavation a very complex series of features overlay the Period 4 surface and the remains of the Period 3 buildings. Until these deposits are fully excavated in 2022 we can only offer a tentative interpretation and phasing. Several points are clear. First, the Period 4 surfaces were overlain by a thick deposit of 'dark earth' which contained a large amount of midden material, including a vast dump of animal bones as well as further evidence for antler and bone working. Second, this midden seems to have accumulated around and across a complex of timber structures that were attributed to Period 5 in 2019. It now seems that this sequence was more complex with a series of structural phases which are likely to continue into the fifth century. Finally, at the current stage of excavation in this area, no further post holes associated with Period 6 have been identified apart from one located in the edge of the cutting through the street. Their apparent absence is most likely to result from the difficulty in identifying cuts within the 'dark earth' and it seems likely that some will be found once the Period 5 deposits have been cleared.

A number of observations can be made about the Period 5 structures although a full interpretation must await completion of the excavation. The final street surface at the southern end of the trench was defined on its northern edge by a silt-filled gully with flat stones at its base. At the eastern end these were clearly the remains of the floor of the Period 3 building, but it seems highly likely that this had been used as the footing for a timber beam, since the northern edge of the gully is straight and abutted by a rubble spread.

This rubble spread, overlying the Period 4 surfaces, includes a series of alignments that were interpreted as beam supports of Period 5 in the 2019 excavation. These alignments continue across the area excavated in 2021 indicating a strip building c. 3m wide running along the northern side of the street. A pair of quern stones may represent post supports on the axis of this building. At the western end of this structure, the rubble runs out (except for a strip along the line of the southern wall) and there is a well-preserved hearth on the axis of the structure.

To the north of this, interpretation is more difficult, but there is clear evidence for a rectangular arrangement of blocks to the north of the first building and an associated east–west alignment of three very substantial blocks that presumably formed post supports. These run just to the south of the line of the Period 3 wall, but interpretation is made more difficult by disturbance from the 1924 excavation beside them. The line of the post supports seems likely to have continued up to the Roman road frontage to the east, abutting a north-south alignment the lies just under the trench edge. Two very substantial reused stone mortars were recovered from this feature. The line of post supports may form a veranda to the side of the building to the south, or alternatively the wall of another building to the north. It is hoped that work in 2022 may resolve this.

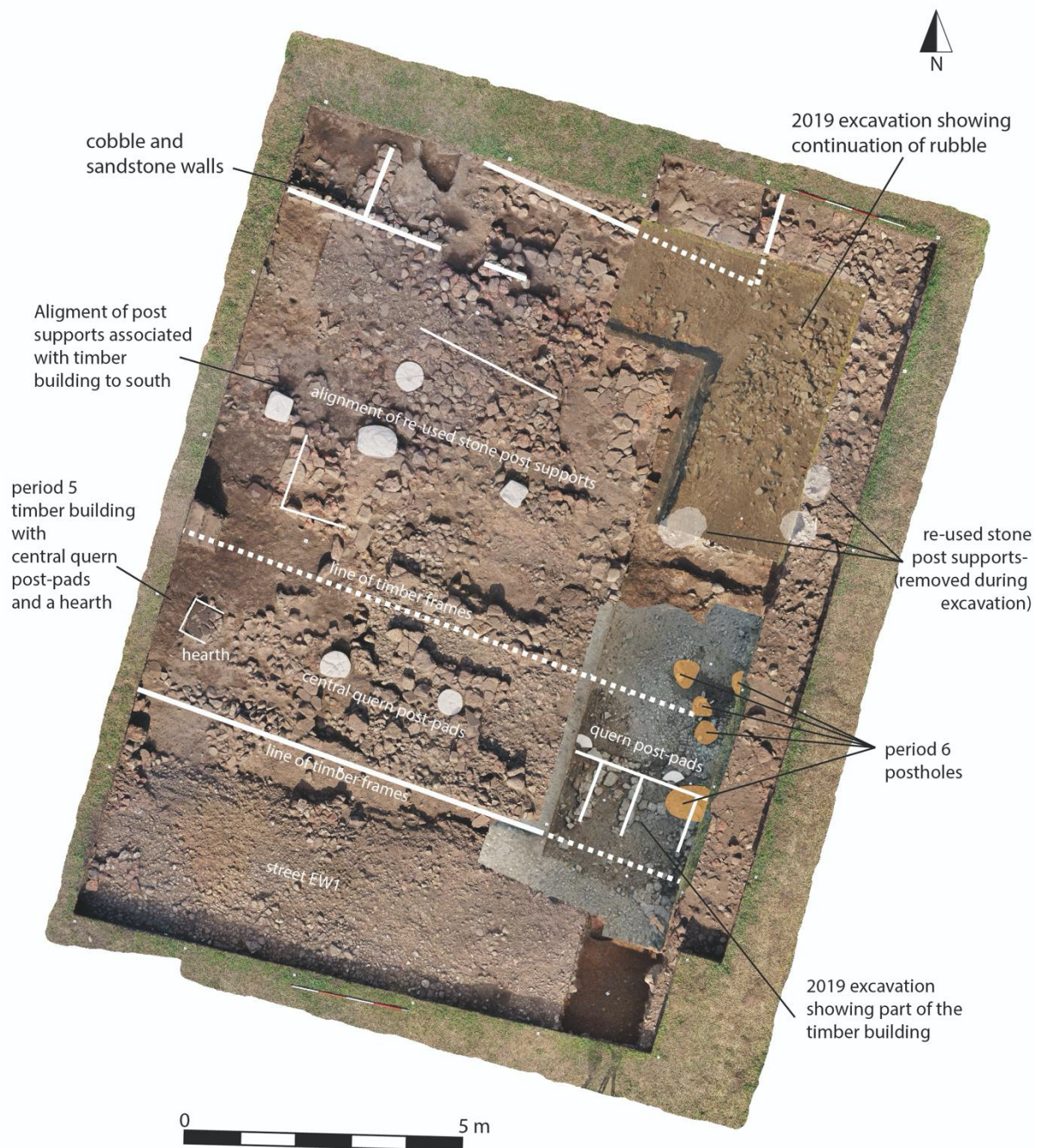


Figure 9: Periods 4, 5 and 6 in the 2019 and 2021 excavations

To the north of the line of substantial post supports a more regular area of rubble may indicate an internal floor or an external yard surface. Included within this was a small uninscribed altar. This reuse of spolia is also attested by the altar found in 2019, the two mortars noted above as well as the group of stonework recovered in 1924. This rubble is defined to the north by an east-west cobble wall foundation, with a short section of walling running north from it in the north-west corner of the trench. A further east-west wall foundation lies along the northern limit of the trench whilst a short section of north-south wall was located towards the north-east corner of the trench.

Whatever the details of this structural sequence it seems clear first that it represents a major phase of activity that continued for some time after the fourth century and second that it defines a significant change in the character of the site. Analysis of the substantial finds assemblage from this phase of activity has the potential to provide important new information about this period.

Period 7 1924 Excavation

The 2021 excavation revealed some further evidence for the extent of the 1924 trenching, with clear signs of disturbance along the line of the east-west wall of the Period 3 building in the central part of the trench. This confirms the evidence from contemporary photographs that show a cutting that revealed blocks of an irregular wall, probably to be identified with the Period 5 features described above. It is hoped that further work on the 1924 plans and photographs may help clarify the exact features found then.



Figure 10: Photographs from the excavations in 1924 showing masonry and some of the post-pads discovered in 2019 and 2021 (left: looking west, right: looking north-west) (Photos: Barber et al 1925)

Discussion

The 2021 excavation provided important new evidence that clarified and extended understanding of the area examined in 2019. Further work is planned for 2022 with the aim of (1) understanding the Period 3, 4, and 5 sequence in the central area of the trench, and (2) completing the excavation of the sequence in the section on the eastern side the of area, taking this down to examine and define the earliest phases of activity in this part of the town. In the meantime, work is progressing on the analysis and interpretation of the large assemblage of finds from the 2021 season.

Acknowledgements

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Once again, we have had a fantastic team of people working with us on site: our thanks to them all for their cheer and enthusiasm. Gigi and Donna Signorelli kept the excavation and finds' tent running like a well-oiled machine. Sarah Talks and Elizabeth Le Duc also assisted with finds, with Elizabeth also sampling the blacksmith's workshop. We were also joined by fantastic postgraduates and undergraduates from the Faculty of Classics: Neal Payne, Sophie Rabinow and Nina Bizziocchi, Alastair Cunningham, Sieve Bonaiut, Harry Derbyshire, Erica Humbey, and Layla Stabile. 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.

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 6th Regiment Royal Logistics Corps from Dishforth, led by their Padre came in at the beginning and end to put up marquees, help de-turf and bring us sausage rolls – many thanks for their help and enthusiasm! The Boroughbridge Allotment Society lent us their marquee and assisted with taking it down, for which we are very appreciative.



Figure 11: End of the dig (Photo: Dominic Powlesland).

Bibliography

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Online resources

Podcasts: Episodes for 2019 and 2021 <https://soundcloud.com/soundingaldborough>

Appendix 1: Project Team

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

Survey Survey: Jason Lucas

Photogrammetry: Dominic Powlesland

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

Geoarchaeology: Charly French

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