

RESCUE EXCAVATIONS ON THE ROMAN OCCUPATION SITE
AT LEGG HOUSE, BLAKENEY, FOREST OF DEAN, GLOS.

Mark Walters

Site Code: LHB 90
Location: Blakeney CP
Grid Ref: SO 673 069

First Interim Report, Winter 1990/91

INTRODUCTION: The potential for surviving archaeological deposits of Romano-British date on this site was confirmed for the first time in 1987.

A local resident watching a pipe-line trench cutting east to west through the interior floor levels of Legg House recorded unbroken occupation layers down to 70cm from present ground level. The pottery recovered dated the occupation to the late 1st and early 2nd centuries AD (1). Besides the present flag-stone floor of the northernmost room a second was noticed at a lower level.

Subsequent to these discoveries further development to the east of Legg House, along Awre Road, provided the opportunity for Dean Archaeological Group to put down two exploratory trenches (Fig. 1A & B) at the easternmost end of 'Croft Orchard'. The trenches, both 3m x 1m, revealed Roman levels sealed by a crushed bloomery slag surface at 1m below present ground level. The soil above consisted of mixed medieval and post-medieval plough-soils. The Roman pottery dated to the late 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

THE SITE: The present excavations began on 15 December 1990 with the kind permission of the present owners of Legg House, Doctors S and A Holland, on the advice that planning consent was being sought for conversion of the property, and disturbance of the archaeological layers was therefore a possibility.

A 2.5 x 3.5m area was opened inside the south room of Legg House (Fig. 1, Area 1) with the intention of exploring all features down to natural to determine the nature of the Roman occupation.

It is intended that the northern room will also be re-explored (Fig. 1, Area 2) along with an area to the rear of the range of buildings extending south from Legg House (Fig. 1, Area 3). The latter area is currently under investigation at the time of writing.

The Area 1 excavation lies on level ground just below the 75ft (23m) contour. The Bideford Brook flows only 15m to the west and runs south for 130m before turning sharply to the west, thus forming a natural boundary to the presumed occupation area on two sides. 40m to the north the land rises sharply, while to the north-west the present A48 is 25m away and possibly follows the line of the Roman road from Gloucester, via Newnham to Chepstow, Caerwent and Caerleon (Margary No. 60A). It is quite feasible that these geographical boundaries provided the criteria for the location of the site under excavation, in the 1st century AD.

AREA 1 PHASE 1

This phase is represented by a linear ditch (Plan 6, 33) oriented east to west running through the excavation area. The feature measures 50cm deep (max.) by 1.50m wide (max.) see Section 9. The sides slope gently at first then shelf off steeply cutting through light yellowish-brown micaceous sandy clays. The cutting of this ditch possibly represents a boundary to an occupation area to the south, or it may be an attempt to drain the land before building commenced. The water presumably exiting west into the brook. There is as yet no dating evidence for when the ditch was cut, however, using the date of its back-filling and its stratigraphical location together, an early to mid-Flavian date is suggested.

PHASE 2

Ditch 33 is back-filled with contexts 34 and 15/16. The lower fill (34) is a dark reddish brown sandy silt with fine charcoal and baked clay inclusions. Some larger pieces of daub recovered display clear traces of wattling, suggesting

Demolition and/or renovation of a nearby structure. The pottery assemblage is wholly early - mid Flavian in date and includes one rim sherd of a wide-mouthed jar derived from local native-wares together with a number of early Severn Valley Ware (SVW) body sherds (Section 9 & Fig.2 No.5). The upper combined fills 15 & 16 clearly show that demolition and/or renovation of a substantial, essentially mid-Flavian structure was under way. We have, as yet, no evidence for this first phase building. Red sandstone blocks (16) up to 32x20x5cm were randomly thrown into the top of ditch 33 along with a quantity of pink micaceous clay, contaminated with dark reddish brown silty loam lenses. The latter completely surrounds most of the sandstone blocks which lie pitched within the clay (Plan 2). The debris would suggest the destruction of a sandstone-coursed wall with clay bonding; the latter perhaps acting as a crude damp-proofing at foundation level.

Finds from (15) include many baked clay daub fragments from the bottom of the fill. Pottery includes a Samian rim fragment which would appear to be from a shallow dish of a Hermet 25 type from La Graufesenque; a body sherd of a form 37 Samian bowl; sherds of a late 1st century SVW rim, a local copy of a BB1 bowl; a BB1 body sherd and a local grey-ware tankard.

Allowing for survival of the latest pottery one cannot place the end of this phase any later than the c.mid-2nd century at the moment.

PHASE III

A new period of construction is represented by this phase. First the ground level over the backfill of 33, and either side of it, is levelled off by an overall layer (36) of dark reddish brown loam which contained many fine charcoal flecks, baked clay fragments and fragments of ceramic roof tile (tegula) which are most likely derived from a Phase 1 building. The pottery includes a Samian form 37 bowl rim, numerous SVW sherds, including a tankard, and grey ware sherds. After levelling, a poor foundation of pitched sandstone flags and blocks (20) was laid N - S at 90° to the line of ditch 33. The first course (3) above this foundation measured 70cm wide and 12cm deep and consisted of local red sandstone facing blocks with a pitched sandstone rubble core which included fragments of tegula and one large ceramic pilae tile, most of which must again have come from the first phase building (see Plans 2 & 6 and Sections 8 & 9).

At the N end of (3) the walls foundations are wider and exceed the width of the first course which has been robbed out at this point in phase 4. This may indicate an entrance here as would the hard, pebbly surface (30) which appears where the foundations end and extends some 120cm to the east.

If this is an entrance then it connects two rooms and not an interior and exterior division for there are two clear survivals of a floor surface to the east and west, 23 and 35 respectively, with 13 being another possible survival of a late repair in the eastern room (see Plan 2).

Surfaces 23 and 13 consist of compact, crushed baked clay fragments, while 35 is a true mortar floor. The latter has been badly cut in its later stages and it also appears to have slumped over the northern edge of ditch 33 below.

Wall 3, rather surprisingly, does not appear to have slumped into the top of 33 which might suggest it either had a short life-span or else it only supported a light structure.

Dating for this phase is very sparse - the construction must have begun by the mid-2nd century at the very latest. There is no pottery or other form of dating evidence which could push the longevity of this phase beyond the 2nd century. Pottery from surface 23 included a small jar rim in a highly micaceous fabric, Fig.2, No.4), and gritted SVW of the late 1st century. Layer 7 contained mid-2nd century BB1 pottery and a grey micaceous tankard base. Fragments of a form 30 Samian drinking cup of late Flavian date were found smashed on top of surface 30. This is, presumably, a survival or was thrown out of context during phase IV robbing activity.

PHASE IV

On present evidence occupation of the phase 3 building would appear to have ceased soon after the middle of the 2nd century. Decay was advanced by robbing activity as shown by the demolition of wall 3 at its northern end. Layer 21 would appear to be associated with the robber's activity. In removing the wall foundation courses they unwittingly left us with our only small find, a silver

plated denarius of Domitian struck in 89 AD (see Plan 2, Δ). Although corroded it had hardly been circulated. In the same context as the coin was the bowl illustrated in Fig.2, No. 1, a grey-ware copy of the form of a Samian 37 bowl but with the moulded decoration replaced by a zone of rouletting.

Floor surfaces 13, 23 and 35 were badly damaged by the robbing and by cutting of pits whose function is not known. Three of these, 8, 10 and 19 were filled by very dark reddish brown silty loams with much charcoal and a great quantity of bloomery slag waste from nearby smelting operations. The pottery from the fills dates to between the late 1st and 2nd centuries, including, from 12, a flagon rim (Fig.2, No.3) and from 11 some South Gaulish Samian fragments and SWW sherds.

Phase IV must belong to the later 2nd century, or beyond, but we have no dating evidence yet to corroborate this. All of the pottery in Phase IV features recovered so far reflects the lack of habitation on the site of the Phase III building as it is all clearly re-deposited from earlier contexts, reflecting the nature of activity at this time. We may seek artefactual evidence, perhaps, with the source of the bloomery slag which suggests a small-scale industrial site in the vicinity.

DISCUSSION

The presence of a substantial building of Flavian date at Blakeney has important implications for the administration of the Forest region in the early years of settled Roman occupation.

To find comparable evidence of such building activity at this date elsewhere in Gloucestershire one has to look to military constructions.

Though there is, as yet, no in situ structural evidence for the first construction phase we can conjecture that it was a high status building judging by the ceramic roof tile and hypocaust fragments recovered. The presence of a large quantity of Flavian-period Samian in such a small area suggests a certain personal wealth on the owners behalf.

The most likely context for the building here is an early administration centre for a high-ranking official, possibly appointed to supervise mining and other economically viable industries in the Forest area. Its termination by the middle of the 2nd century may indicate that economic interests had been handed over to civilian administrative bodies, or the official residence had been re-located.

- See below: Bryan Walters, 'The Forest of Dean - A Roman Imperial Estate ?'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Many thanks to Drs. S & A Holland for permission to carry out excavations on their land. Without the constant support of Terry James on the excavation this would have been a considerably longer and lonelier task. Thanks are also due to Jill David and Lyza Beddis who also helped with excavation and to Bryan Walters for advice on the pottery dating and for the pottery drawings in this report.

1. The New Regard, 1987, pp 82,83.

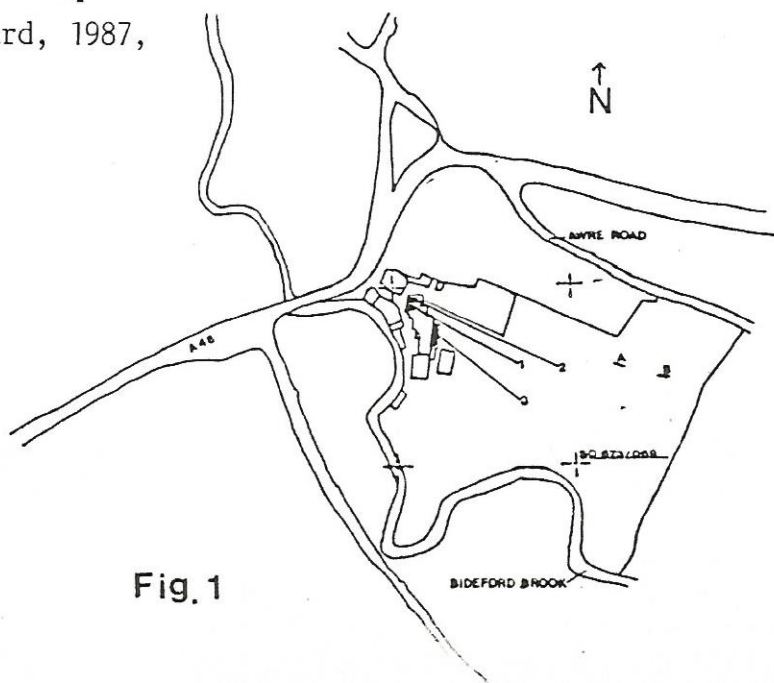
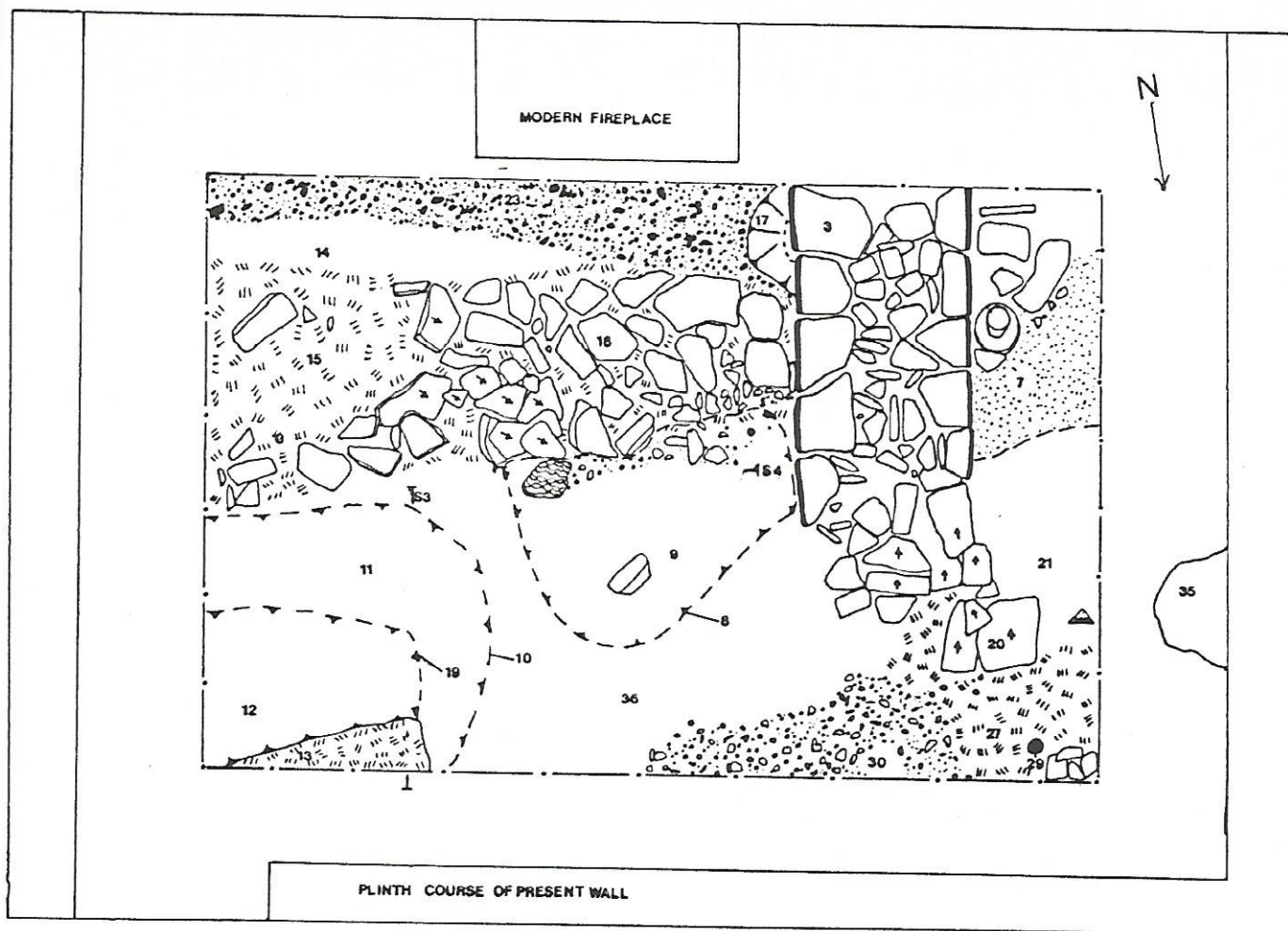
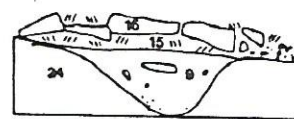


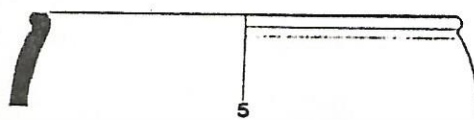
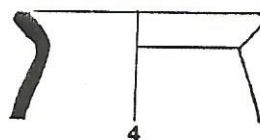
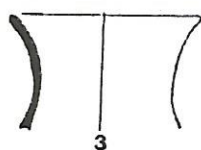
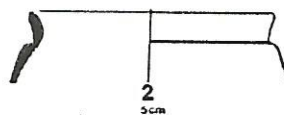
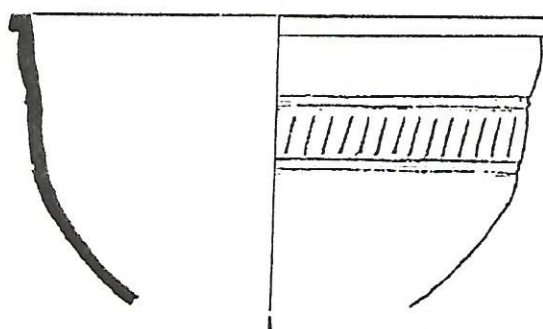
Fig. 1

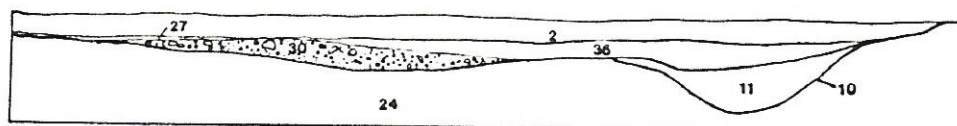
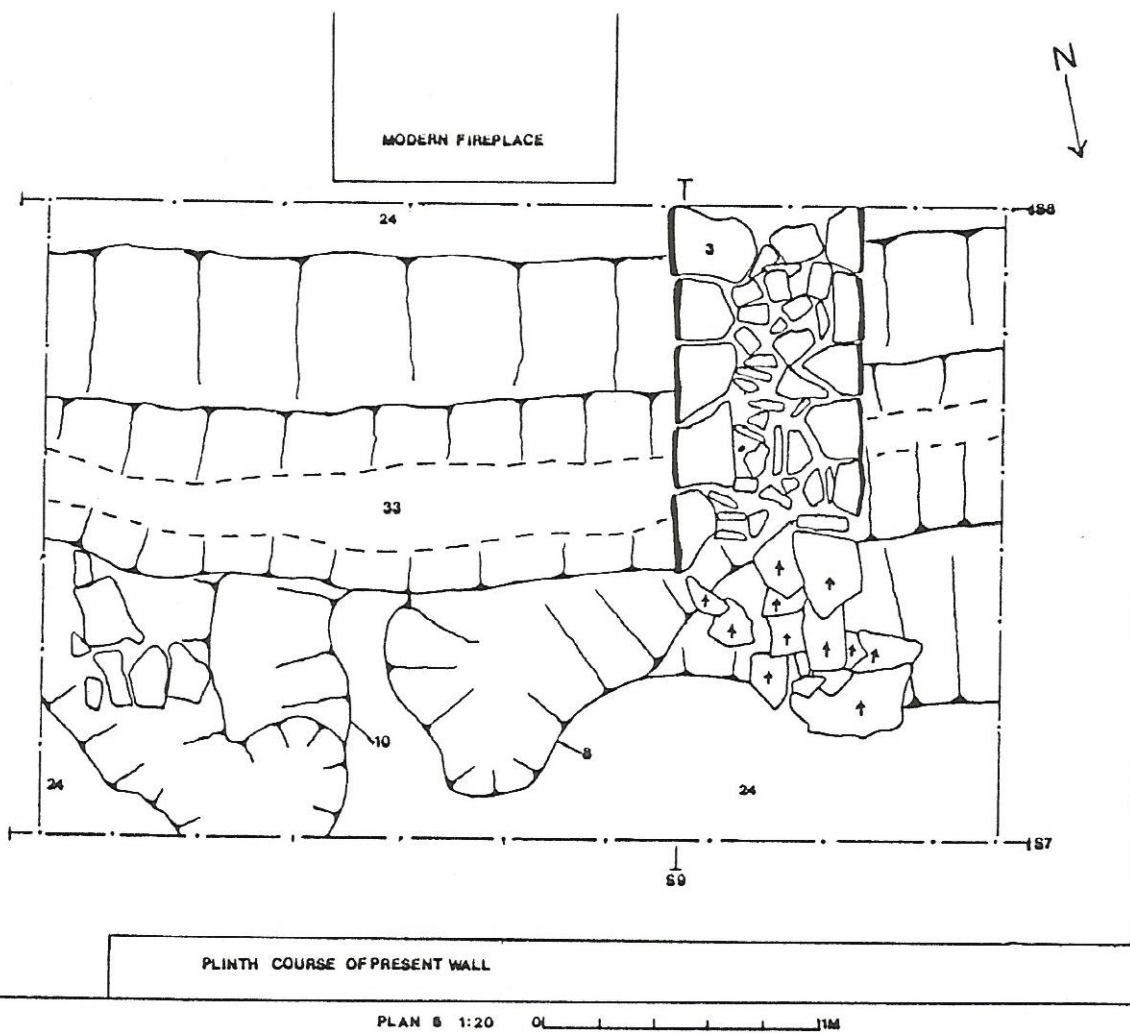


SECTION 3 1:10

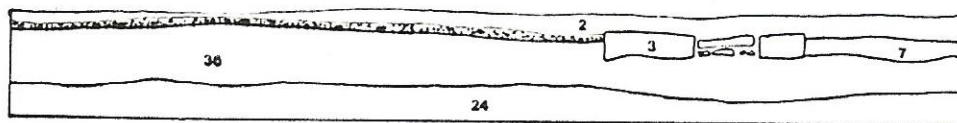


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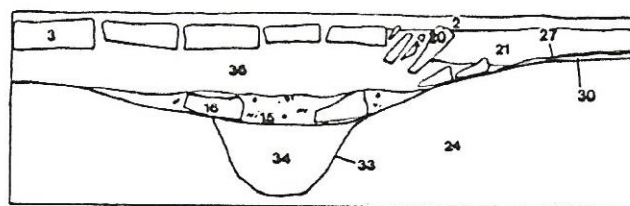




SECTION 7 1:20



SECTION 8 1:20



SECTION 9 1:20