

An Excavation near the Dominican Friary at Dunstable

by I. M. Stead

In 1965 the Manshead Archaeological Society started an excavation in Friary Field, Dunstable (TL 019216), after a length of wall and a tiled oven had been found in a drainage trench. Nearby the site of a Dominican Friary had been recorded and excavated in 1921 and 1924 (Bagshawe & Martin, 1927) and it seemed that the new discovery belonged to the Dominicans' kitchens. Subsequent excavations unearthed more buildings of the Friary as well as Romano-British features including a well, a cemetery and a major ditch, but the most puzzling feature was an orderly arrangement of pits and trenches. The pits were large, cruciform in plan and regimented in a network six wide and twelve long over an area of about 60m by 30m bounded by trenches. Two similar and immediately adjoining arrangements of pits were later identified. Puzzled by his discovery, Leslie Matthews, Site Director for the Society, publicised the find amongst archaeologists with a wide range of interests. Two possible explanations were advanced: first, that it was the site of a huge building - a late Roman granary or an Arthurian hall were suggested; and second, that it had served some horticultural purpose - a garden or orchard, possibly connected with the Friary.

In 1971, prompted by plans to build two roads across Friary Field, the Manshead Archaeological Society approached the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Department of the Environment, and suggested extensive excavations beyond the means of a local society. Seeking a second opinion about the cruciform pits, Matthews invited the writer to direct further excavations. The outcome, at Easter 1972, was intended as a preliminary to more extensive work, but in the event the Inspectorate was reorganised in 1973 and the writer was moved to other duties. On the 1972 excavation A. L. Pacitto assisted in the direction and sites were supervised by Ann Dent and A. B. Havercroft; Havercroft's site comprised the buildings of the Dominican Friary - work which continued under his own direction and which will be published

elsewhere.

The area of the cruciform pits had been so extensively trenched by the Manshead Archaeological Society that there could be no doubt about the overall plan. Two problems remained: the function of the pits, for which the two very different explanations had been advanced and their date - for although Medieval pottery had been found in them, it had all been assigned to later disturbances. The four pits selected for excavation had not been examined by the Manshead Society, although their positions had been inferred (nos. 23, 24, 29 and 30, Area A, Fig. 1; cf Matthews 1970: 5, fig. 1). The featureless topsoil (0.5 to 0.6m deep) was stripped by a Drott Tractorshovel and the four pits sharply defined in solid chalk were then excavated by a team of extremely experienced archaeologists who subjected them to detailed criticism: P. Brown, J. L. Flouest, R. E. M Hedges, R. W. Mackey and I. W. J. Pratt. The position of every glazed Medieval sherd was individually plotted, and each pit was tackled in a different way in an attempt to identify any intrusive feature. Pit 23 was sectioned, and half of it removed; 24 was cut in the opposite direction and excavated in a series of vertical strips; 29 was excavated in plan, a spit at a time; and quadrants were cut from pit 30.

The pits were fairly uniform in size, between 3.55 and 3.7m long and with arms 1.65 to 1.9m across. They had been cut between 0.7 and 0.85m into chalk and had straight sides inclined only a little from the vertical - so that the measurement at the bottom was 0.2 to 0.25m within that at the top. Each pit had a flat base, and in most it seemed that the excavators had taken great trouble to clear out all the loose chalk - so clean were the floors of the pits that they might even have been brushed. There was no hint of weathering, and the pits can have been open for no more than a day or two before being backfilled. The filling was of brown earth quite indistinguishable from topsoil. In pit 24 this filling was without feature; pit 30 (Fig 2, e-f) showed a hint of a slight central rise within the filling towards

Editor's Note. This report by Dr Stead (a Vice President of the Society) was written in the early 1980s but was never published. The report on Medieval pottery in last year's Journal prompted the writer to send it to me for publication. No attempt has been made to integrate the findings of the Manshead with those found by Dr Stead. It was felt that at this stage it is sufficient to have the evidence published. Anyone wishing to know more about this site is encouraged to consult the Manshead Journals where much of the excavation evidence is to be found.

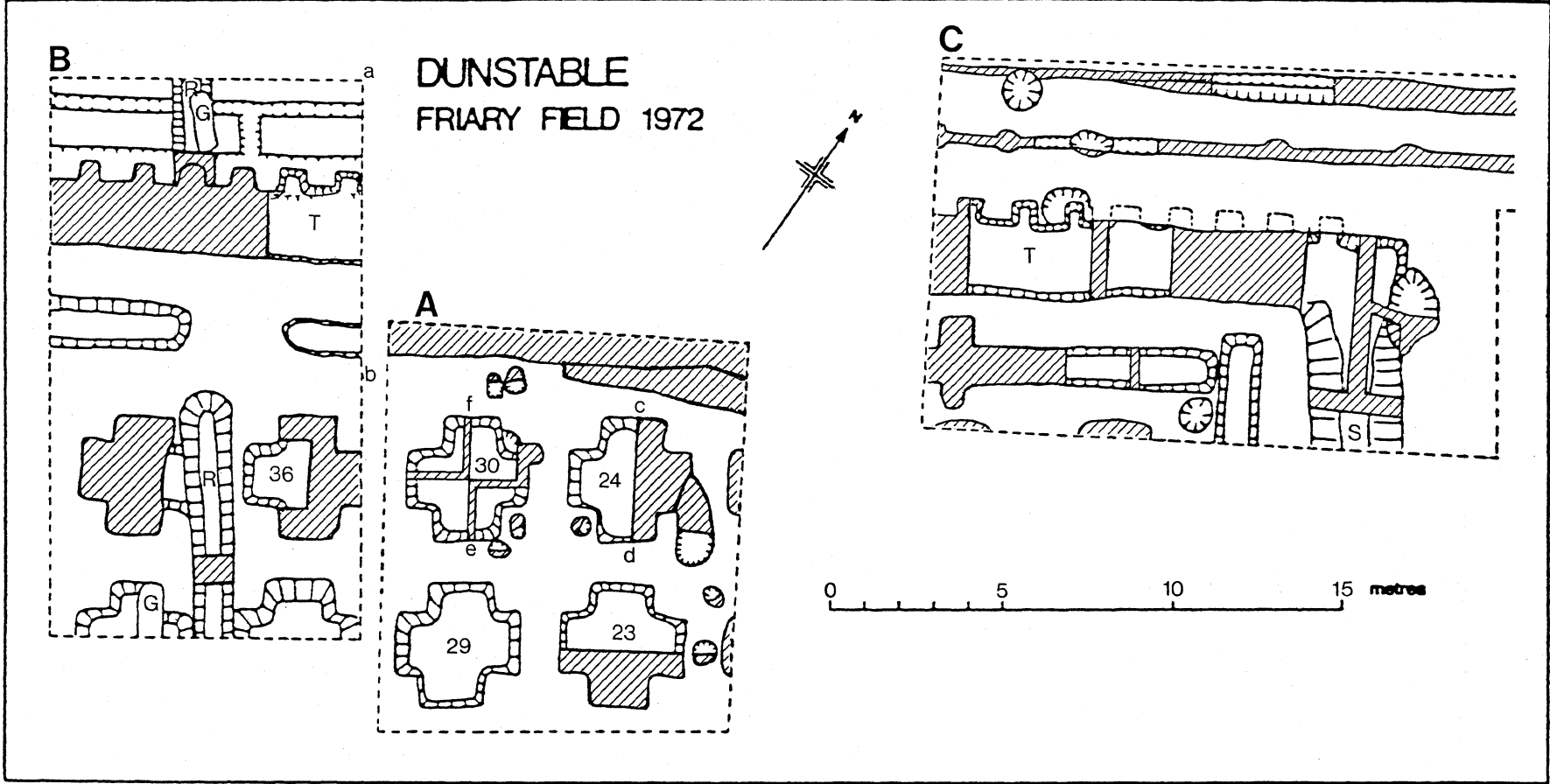


Fig. 1. Plan of the area excavated in 1972.

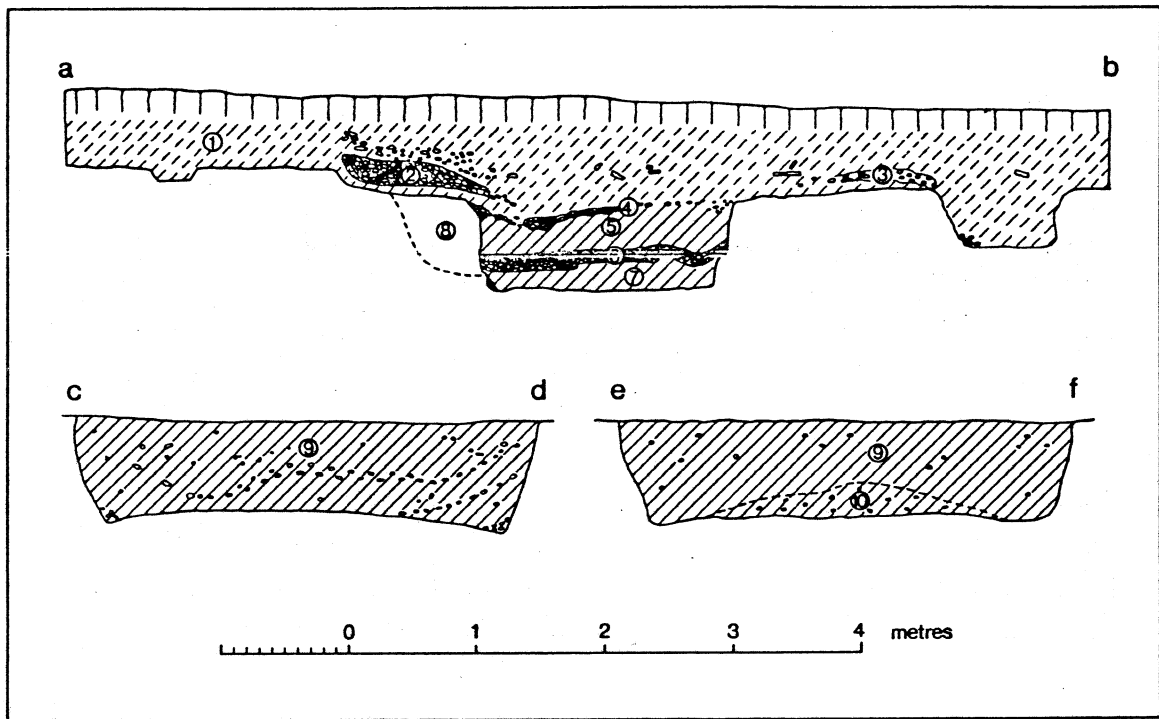


Fig 2. Sections a - b through Trench T, Area B; c - d and e - f, through cruciform pits 24 and 30. For the location of the sections see Fig 1. Layers: 1, clear grey-brown earth; 2, 4 and 6, fairly clean small chalk; 3, chalk with little earth; 5 and 7, dark grey brown earth; 8, profile of 'projection'; 9, dark grey-brown earth; 10, grey-brown earth.

the bottom; and distinct filling lines could be seen in pits 23 (Fig 2, c-d) and 29 - typical top-soil alternating with layers including rather more chalk but none of the pits produced any quantity of chalk; a substantial amount of chalk had been removed from the site, and it had been replaced by what seemed to be fairly clear local top-soil.

In the four pits excavated there was only one disturbance, a slight feature no more than 0.3m in diameter in the upper part of pit 30 - it was of interest because it produced three seventeenth-century sherds. Pits 29 and 30 cut Romano-British features - one with two Theodosian coins in it. But a fair number of glazed Medieval sherds were found, and they were distributed throughout the filling of the pits. There can be no doubt that they entered the pits with the original filling and within a few days of the excavation. Like the Romano-British Sherds from the same filling, which considerably outnumbered the Medieval pieces, all the pottery was in small fragments and probably residual. Pit 29 was completely excavated, and the excavation of pit 30 was virtually completed; they produced 23 and 25 glazed Medieval sherds respectively. From pits 23 and 24, each half-excavated, there were 17 and 21 glazed Medieval sherds. John Cherry has examined all the pottery and he reports that the latest Sherds are from thirteenth and fourteenth century vessels - nothing need be later than c. 1350.

Area B had been stripped and partly excavated by

the Manshead Archaeological Society, but the present team investigated a small part of pit 36 in advance of the excavation of Area A. The filling resembled that of Pits 23, 24, 29 and 30, and included similar Medieval pottery. But interest in Area B was concentrated on a curious trench uncovered and sectioned by the previous excavators (Trench T). A 9m length had been exposed, and 2.7m of it completely excavated. Like the pits the trench had near-vertical sides and measured about 2m wide where it cut the chalk, and 1.7m wide at the bottom. It was cut about 0.8m into chalk, its base being about 1.5m below present ground level. The bottom was fairly level, but not as cleanly finished as the floors of the pits. In the sections of the excavated portion the trench was filled with dark grey-brown earth, a little darker than but otherwise very similar to the earth covering natural chalk over the entire site (Fig 2, a-b). Some 0.15 to 0.25m from the bottom the earth is interrupted by clean chalk in a layer a little over 0.1m deep, and a much slighter layer of similar chalk covered the trench at about the level of natural Chalk.

On the north side of the trench there were six rectangular projections, each about 0.7m wide at chalk level, cut just over 0.5m from the chalk of the trench, and set at intervals of between 0.7 and 0.9m. The two projections previously excavated were up to 0.1m shallower than the main trench. Two of the projections still unexcavated had fillings of a slightly different

colour from that of the main trench, which might suggest that the two features were not contemporary, but when one was sectioned it proved impossible to trace the difference vertically. The Inspectorate's team did not excavate any other feature in this area. Parallel trenches and cuttings are presumably part of the same arrangement as Trench T, but Ditch R was clearly earlier and the Manshead Society had found Roman graves cut into it (the junctions between Ditch R and the cruciform pits had been previously excavated).

Area C was opened in order to expose a further length of Trench T, and to see how it behaved when it reached the east end of the arrangement of cruciform pits. Three lengths of the trench and three adjoining projections were excavated. The trench was filled with dark earth and chalk, very similar to its filling in Area B, but here in the upper part was a lighter coloured soil including some yellowish sand - a distinctive layer which extended into one of the excavated projections although a lower layer of chalk in that projection seemed to have been cut by the filling of the trench. The filling of another projection was clearly distinguished from that of the trench, along a straight line in a way consistent with the projection having been cut by the trench. Furthermore, all projections were covered by a layer of chalk (seen in the section of Area B, Fig 2 a-b) which stopped at the north edge of Trench T and had probably been cut by it. The evidence suggests that the projections were cut before Trench T, but the plan shows that both features - and the cruciform pits - belonged to the same overall arrangement. Sherds from Trench T covered the same range as those from the cruciform pits.

Trench T came to an end within Area C, and is joined at right-angles by Trench S - wide and shallow with a rather rounded profile, ill-defined because the natural chalk was here quite loose. Trench S defines the eastern end of the arrangement of cruciform pits.

The purpose of the cruciform pits has yet to be resolved, but it seems highly unlikely that any of the features excavated had been intended to house timber posts. Normally postholes would be very much

smaller, and posts would be tightly packed. The Manshead excavators considered the possibility of an elaborate arrangement of braced timbers in the holes and trenches; but such a construction would not require the total removal of the chalk. The obvious use for a great depth of earth is for growing plants of some kind, but there seems to be no known parallel for the vast scale and plan of this particular enterprise. The problem was discussed with a local market-gardener and a herb-grower but no new ideas were forthcoming, although it was emphasised that a greater depth of top-soil would produce better results whatever the product. Conceivably the entire operation was the result of some quite illogical whim.

The chalk subsoil precluded any pollen analysis, and the only other line of enquiry which seemed worthwhile was an examination of the existing flora, in case any unusual species had survived. J. G. Dony kindly undertook this survey, but produced no surprises. A search at the County Archivist's Office, instigated by David Baker, failed to find any relevant documents.

The positive conclusion of the Inspectorate's excavation was with regard to the date of the site, for there can be no doubt that it was Medieval and little doubt that it was excavated in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. If it was some kind of a garden then it seems unlikely that it was related to the Dominicans, who were a teaching order subsisting mainly on begging. Beyond that, the cruciform pits remain a mystery whose solution must await the discovery of a similar site or of new documents relating to the history of Dunstable.

Bibliography

- Bagshawe, T. W., & Martin, A. R., 1927, "The Dominican Priory of Dunstable, with an account of some recent excavations on the site", *J. British Arch. Ass.* n.s. 33 (1927) 321 - 42.
- Matthews, C.L., 1970, "Excavations carried out on the Friary Field, Dunstable, 1969 - 70", *The Manshead Magazine* 20 (1970) 3 - 16.