

# Trowbridge Castle Excavations 1988

## Wiltshire

### Interim Report



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TROWBRIDGE CASTLE EXCAVATIONS 1988.

AN INTERIM REPORT.

by

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TRUST FOR WESSEX ARCHAEOLOGY 1988

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### AN INTERIM REPORT.

#### Introduction.

In January, February and March of 1988, excavations took place on the recently-cleared site of the Co-operative Dairy Depot, on the south side of Court Street, close to the centre of modern Trowbridge. This was the final stage in the archaeological investigation of the site of the 12th-century Trowbridge Castle (Rogers 1984, 12-13), which lies within the limits of 'The Shires' town centre re-development (Fig. 1).

Archaeological excavation was first carried out by Wiltshire County Council Library and Museums Service in 1977 (Canham *et al.*, in preparation). This uncovered the remains of a small Norman church and graveyard, buried beneath a layer of clay thought to have been the bank or motte of the castle. The present series of excavations by the Trust for Wessex Archaeology began in April 1985, with a small trench which established the position of the western side of the castle's Outer Bailey moat (Smith 1986), and continued on a larger scale from October 1986 to the end of May 1987 (Davies and Graham 1987). These excavations established the nature and position of the castle's defences along the north and west sides of the Inner and Outer Baileys; revealed extensive traces of the manorial settlement which pre-dated it (including evidence

of Saxon and prehistoric occupation on the site); and uncovered the western limit of the graveyard found in 1977.

The 1988 excavations were confined to the area of the Inner Bailey, and comprised a single area, north-south across the top of the plateau on which the castle was built (Plates 1 and 2). Because of the larger area available for excavation, it is possible to make a definitive statement about the development of the church, the graveyard and the castle during the 12th and 13th centuries, which differs in some details from that presented following the 1987 excavations.

The area excavated included the western wall of the church and the western part of the graveyard; a total of 269 graves were excavated and recorded. The evidence showed that when the castle was built in c.1139, the Inner Bailey bank covered only the northern part of the graveyard, and the church continued in use within the defences of the castle, the graveyard expanding southwards and westwards, beyond its original boundaries. It was only in the later 12th or early 13th century that the church and graveyard went out of use, being covered with a layer of clay, probably representing the levelling of the castle's defensive earthworks. Traces of the contemporary settlement were found to the south of the Churchyard, and extensive evidence of earlier occupation was found both beneath and to the south of it. At the base of the excavated sequence, boundaries of the later prehistoric period showed that the site had been part of a wider prehistoric landscape. The descriptions below cover the broad chronological periods into which the site can be divided. These have been illustrated in Figs. 2-5.

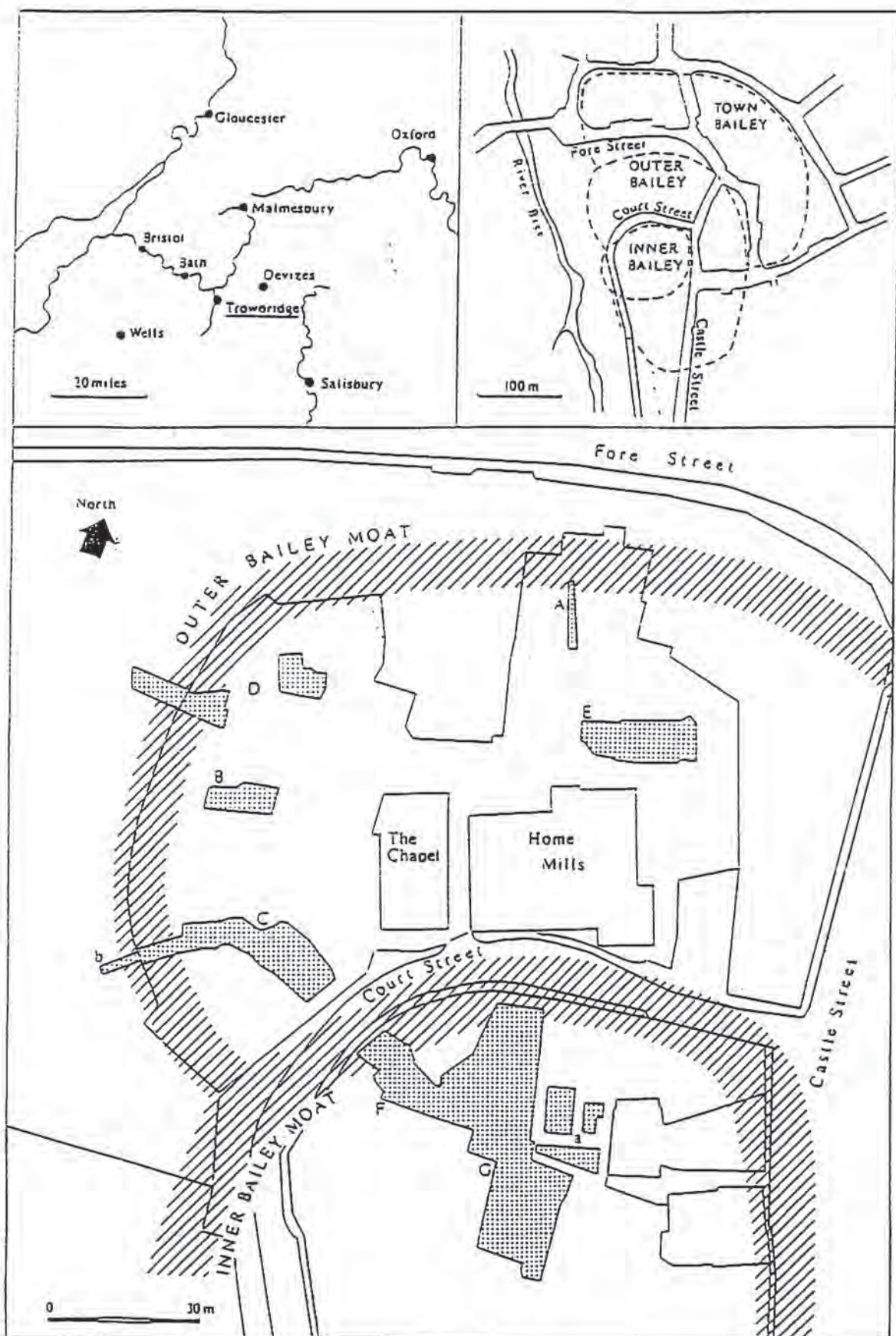


Fig. 1. Site location and areas excavated (stippled). Key: a 1977 Trenches. b 1986 Trench. A-F 1987 Trenches. G 1988 Trench.

### The Prehistoric Period. (Fig.2).

In the surface of the clayey sub-soil which overlay the cornbrash bedrock, shallow scratches were observed in one part of the trench (Fig. 2, 1), which may have been the marks of ploughing. The marks were aligned east-west, parallel and to the north of the deep slot (Fig. 2, 2), which was otherwise the earliest feature found. This was square-cut and up to 0.70m deep; the variations within its fill suggested that it had held vertical timbers, which would have formed a substantial palisade boundary across the hilltop. The cluster of pits to the south of it (Fig. 2, 3) may have been contemporary, all these features containing sherds of similar pottery, dateable to the earlier Iron Age. The four-post structure excavated in 1987 (Fig. 2, 4) may also be contemporary, and would generally be interpreted as the post-holes for the corners of an above ground grain-store. Taken together, these fragments of evidence show that in the later prehistoric period the site was part of an organised rural landscape.

Change in the landscape was however continuous, and a later boundary ditch (Fig. 2, 5) cut across the line of the palisade. Aligned north-south, this was relatively shallow and rounded, and ran across the whole of the area excavated; pottery sherds from its infilling seem to be Late Iron Age or Early Romano-British.

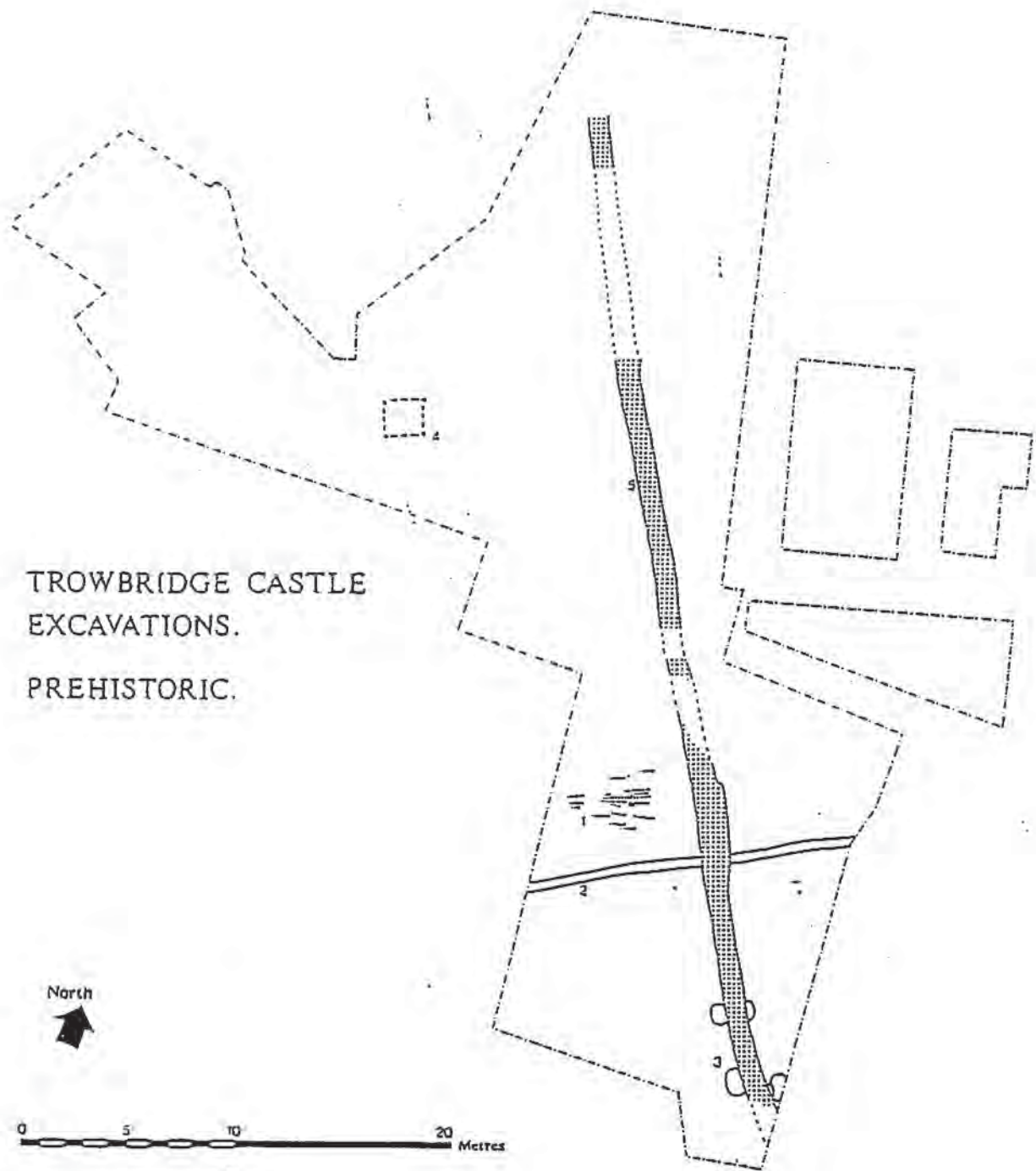


Fig. 2. The Prehistoric Period. Key: 1 Ploughing scratchmarks.  
2 Palisade slot. 3 Pits. 4 Boundary Ditch. 5 Four-post structure.

The Saxon and Earlier Medieval Period. (Fig. 3).

The evidence for the Saxon settlement of the site was mainly excavated in 1987 (Davies and Graham 1987), and comprised a *Grubenhaus* and post-hole building (Fig. 3, 1 and 2). The 1988 excavations revealed a group of small pits, all with a charcoal and ash infill, lying to the east of these buildings, and to the north, a shallow slot forming three sides of a square or rectangular structure (Fig. 3, 3 and 4). No other definite structures were found, but it should be stressed that the groups of post-holes in the south of the area excavated (Fig. 3, 5 and 6; Plate 3), may, after detailed analysis, resolve themselves into recognisable structures, contemporary with those excavated in 1987. Fragments of clay loom weights similar to those associated with the *Grubenhaus* were found in the 1988 excavations, in a substantial spread of burnt clay daub, probably from a destroyed building in the vicinity.

The post-holes can be shown to pre-date the enclosure which was the next major feature on the hilltop (Fig. 3, 7 and 8; Plate 3). This comprised a curving ditch running from the north-west to the south-east, the line of which was broken by a narrow causeway, to the south of which were two substantial post-holes suggesting a gateway (Fig. 3, 7, 8 and 9). The ditch was c.2m wide and c.1.50m deep, with straight-sloping sides and a narrow flat base. Its infilling suggested that a bank had stood on its south-western side, running up to the posts of the gateway. It seems to have enclosed the highest part of the plateau upon which the site lay, but very little of the area within it was excavated. Precisely what it

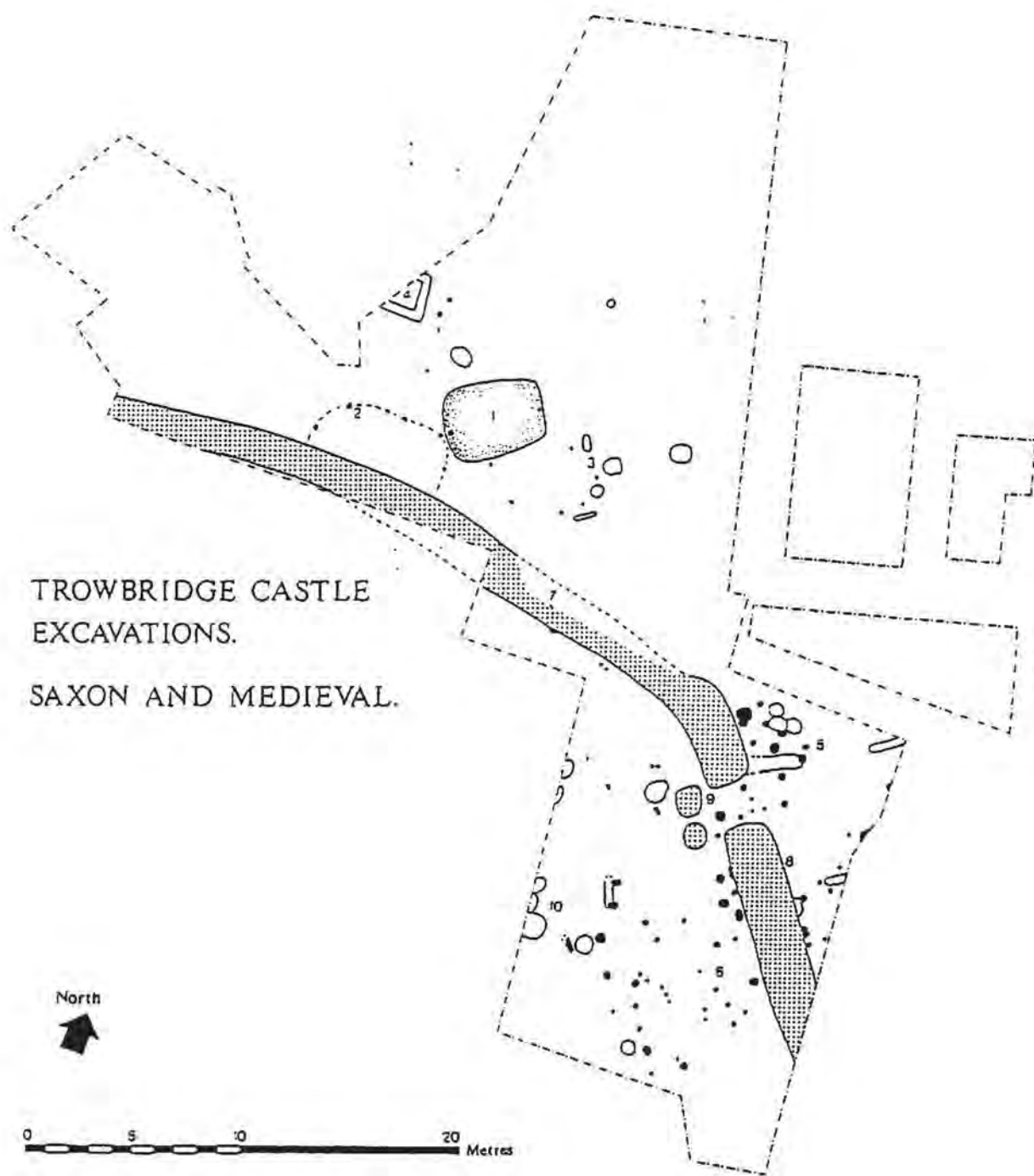


Fig. 3. The Saxon and Early Medieval Period. Key: 1 The *Grubenhäuser*. 2 Post-hole building. 3 Pits and post-holes (black). 4 Rectangular structure. 5 Post-holes (black), pre-dating the enclosure ditch. 6 Post-holes (black). 7 Enclosure ditch. 8 Enclosure ditch. 9 Entranceway, with post-holes (stippled) for gateway. 10 Miscellaneous pits.

enclosed or defined is therefore uncertain, but perhaps the residence of *Brictric*, the owner of the manor of Trowbridge recorded in *Domesday*.

The enclosure ditch may have been a fairly long-lasting feature in the landscape; the more northerly part of it (Fig. 3, 7) clearly pre-dates the digging of the ditch around the graveyard (Fig. 4), and its south-eastern butt end was filled with the spoil from digging that ditch.

However, a broken pot from the base of the southerly part of the enclosure ditch (Fig. 3, 8) can be dated to the 12th century at the earliest, contemporary with the later phases of the graveyard, and it seems that this hilltop enclosure, though modified, may have remained in use until the construction of the castle c.1139.

#### The Norman Church and Graveyard. (Fig. 4; Plates 4 and 5).

The west wall of the church lay on the edge of the area excavated and consequently little detailed information about it was recovered. The wall itself was built of faced Bath Stone blocks (Fig. 6; Plates 2 and 4), of which 7 remained *in situ*, including the large south-western corner stone of the church. These had been set on a footing of stone rubble c. 0.40m deep, and at least 0.90m wide. The discovery of the west wall completes the plan of the church recovered in 1977. No evidence of an earlier structure was found, and there was no evidence that any of the graves pre-dated the construction of the stone church.

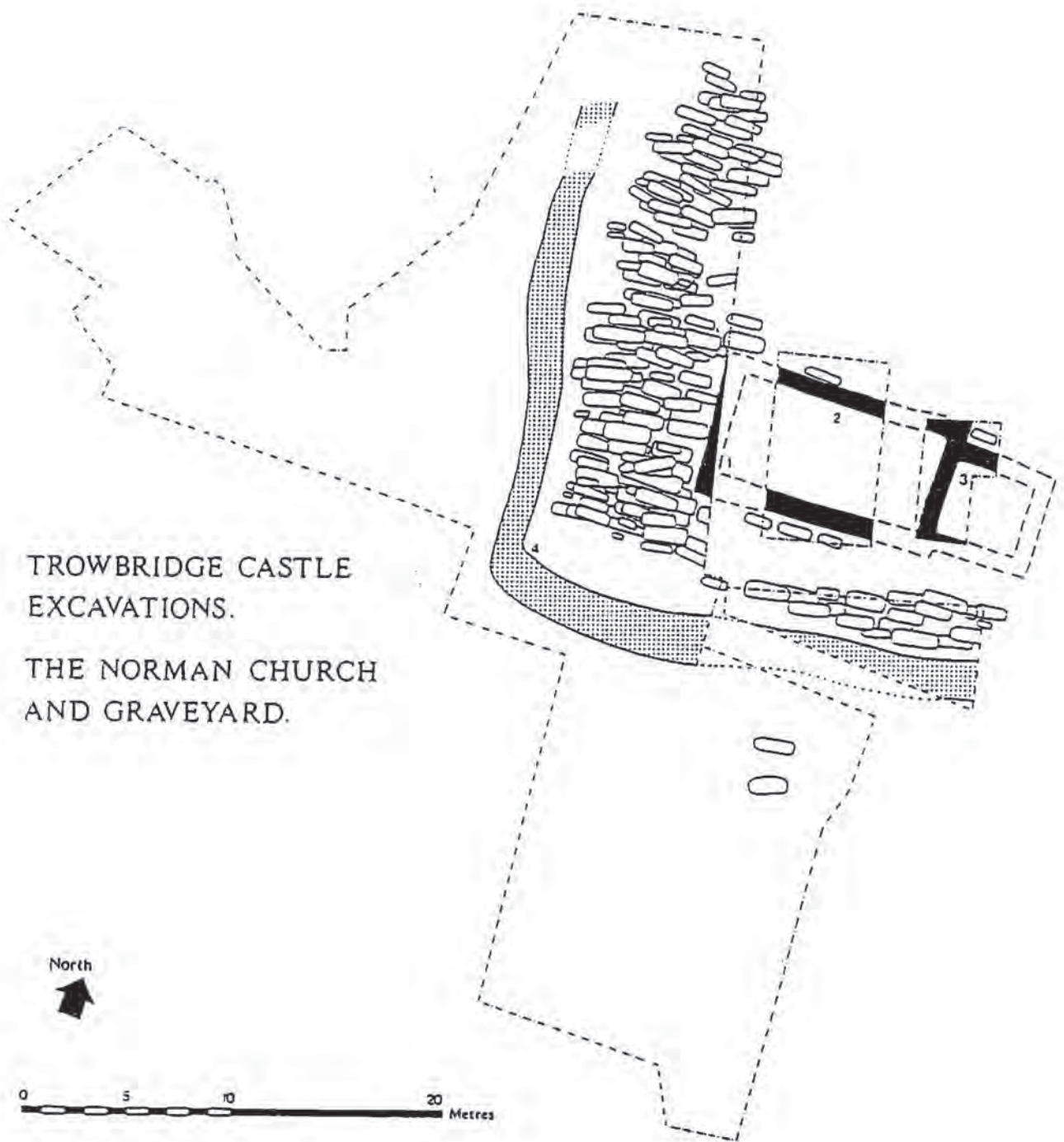


Fig. 4. The Norman Church and Graveyard. Key: 1 The west wall of the nave. 2 The nave. 3 The chancel. 4 The churchyard boundary ditch.

The excavations showed that at least on the west and south, the graveyard was enclosed by a ditch (Fig. 4, 4). This was deeper and wider along the south, being up to 2m wide and 1.20m deep, with a rounded profile, but shallower on the west, perhaps because of the downward slope of the ground to the north. The evidence suggests an internal bank along the west and south-west sides of the graveyard, but due south of the church, an external bank, overlying the butt end of the earlier enclosure ditch. Within these boundaries lay the graves.

The immediate impression of the graveyard is of crowding and jumble (Fig. 6 shows all the recorded graves; Plates 4 and 5), but much of this, particularly in those areas of the graveyard to the north-west and south-west of the church, may have taken place after the construction of the castle, when space became limited. If the later graves are removed, two rows become apparent, lying to the west and south-west of the church, with the later graves forming a third row between the two. Some formality in the layout of the graveyard is therefore clear, and in some instances specific grave plots seem to have been used on more than one occasion. There is every likelihood of family ownership of burial plots, and this may be reflected in some of the concentrations of burials. The northern part of the graveyard (subsequently covered by the castle bank) would have comprised well over half the area of the burial ground (Fig. 4). The excavated part of it was similar in its layout to the areas to the south, with overlapping rows of graves, and at least two separate groups.

All the graves contained extended inhumations with the arms generally along the sides of the corpse. The posture of the skeleton in the grave sometimes suggested that it had been tightly shrouded, and in a number of cases the head of the corpse had been supported with stones or, more rarely, the grave partly lined with stone slabs. Only one grave, in the north-west part of the churchyard, produced evidence of a coffin.

Traces of planking were found above and at the sides of the skeleton, forming a timber lining to the grave, within which was a packing of stone rubble. Inevitably, the later burials tended to disturb earlier skeletons. These disturbed bones seem always to have been returned to the ground, often packed along the sides of the new burial. Skulls and long bones had been reburied in this way, and there were a number of instances of skulls being used in the place of stones to support the head of the corpse (Plate 5).

The period of time over which the burial ground was in use is uncertain because the construction date of the church is unknown. Specific areas of the graveyard went out of use with the construction of the castle in c.1139, and other areas came into use only after that date. All the burials, however, probably lie within the 11th and 12th centuries; a period of no more than two hundred years, and perhaps considerably less. The excavated skeletons are therefore an important sample of the population of the medieval community over that period. Even before a detailed study of the skeletons has been made, the high instance of rheumatoid arthritis on the bones has been noted. The skeletons also contain a record of specific tragedies in the lives of people otherwise obscure. The woman who died in childbirth (Plate 5); the man whose

severely broken thigh bone healed to leave one leg considerably shorter than the other; the hunch-back buried in the north-western corner of the graveyard (Plate 6).

#### The Construction of the Castle and the Mid-12th Century Graveyard.

(Fig. 5).

Documentary sources refer to the castle at Trowbridge as being besieged by the supporters of King Stephen in 1139, during the Anarchy Period wars. The position and nature of the 12th-century castle were largely revealed by the 1986-7 season of excavations, and confirmed what had long been inferred from the street plan of the town (Rogers 1984, 13-14); a large motte and bailey castle, with an Inner Bailey to the south of Court Street and an Outer Bailey to the North (Fig. 1). The position of a Motte is still unconfirmed archaeologically.

In 1988 the position of the Inner Bailey moat was again established, and remnants of the clay of the bank were excavated (Fig. 5, 1 and 2). It was possible to establish precisely the line of the back of the bank, because a number of graves were excavated which had been cut into it (Fig. 5, 3), giving a width at the base of c.10m. Because of this, the four large post-holes excavated in 1987 (Fig. 5, 4) can now be seen as lying just behind the bank, and may have been part of the castle defences.

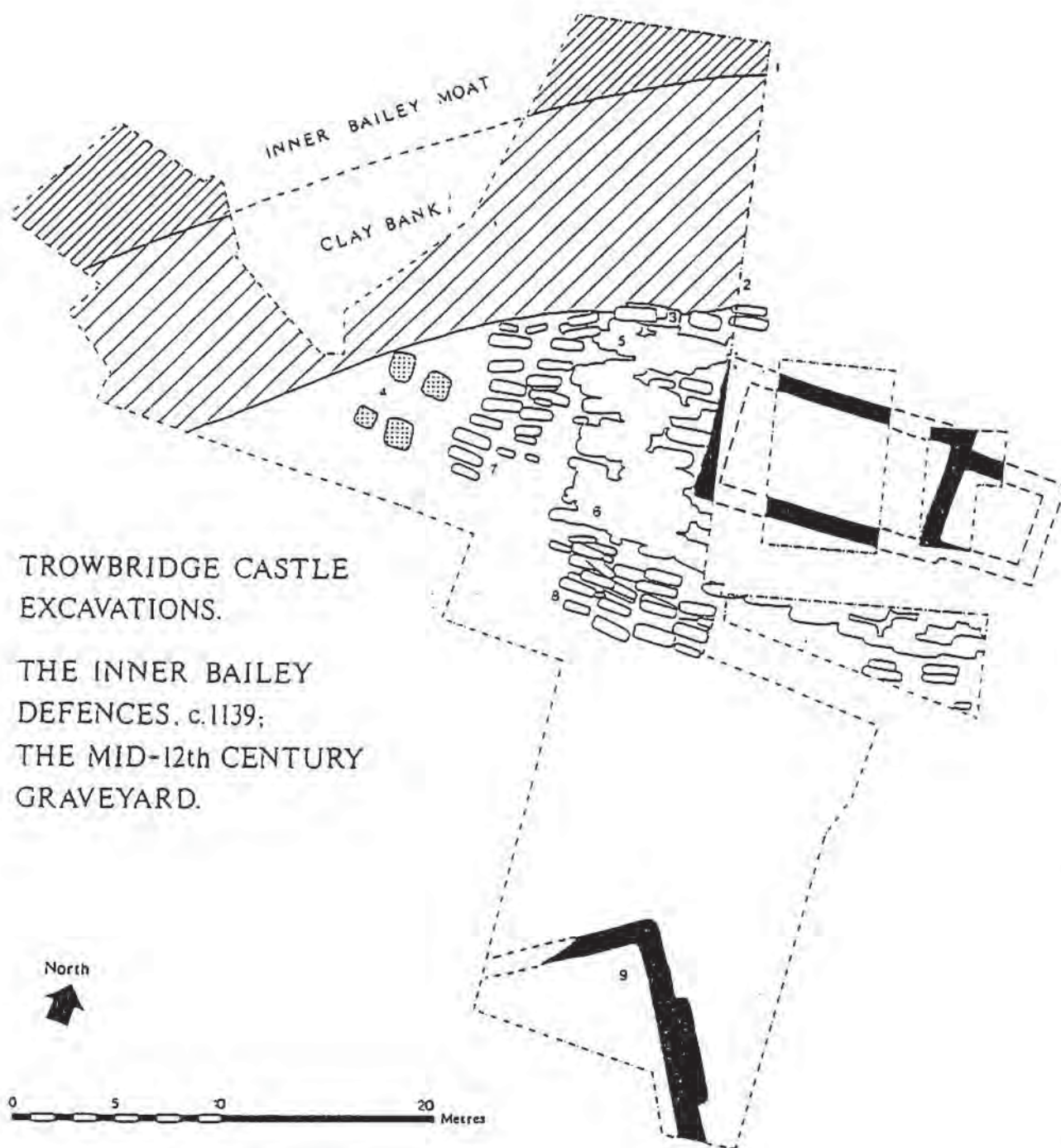


Fig. 5. The Inner Bailey defences, c.1139, and the Mid-12th Century Graveyard. Key: 1 The inner edge of the moat. 2 The clay bank. 3 Graves cutting the back of the bank. 4 Post-holes. 5 North-west corner of the graveyard. 6 South-west corner of the graveyard. 7 Western graveyard extension. 8 Southern graveyard extension. 9 Wall footings.

With the loss beneath the castle bank of the area of the graveyard which lay to the north of the church, space for burials had become limited. It may have been from this time that the crowding of burials into specific areas of the graveyard took place; in the newly-defined north-west corner of the graveyard, behind the castle bank, and in the original south-west corner (Fig. 5, 5 and 6. and Fig. 6). The graveyard also expanded in two areas, across the original boundary ditches which by this time remained only as shallow hollows; to the West two rows of graves spread southwards from the back of the castle bank (Fig. 5, 7); and to the south, the existing rows of graves were continued southwards (Fig. 5, 8 and Fig. 6).

#### **The Levelling of the Castle and Eventual Disuse of the Church and Graveyard.**

The area of the graveyard was eventually covered with a layer of clay, of which remnants remained for excavation. Originally this had covered the whole area of the excavation to a distance of c.17m from the back of the castle bank, and it seems to represent the levelling of at least the northern part of the bank. The date of this event is unclear, but a late 12th- century or early 13th-century date seems possible. The levelling of the castle bank suggests an early disuse of the castle as a defensive structure, a conclusion which was also suggested by the 1987 excavations.

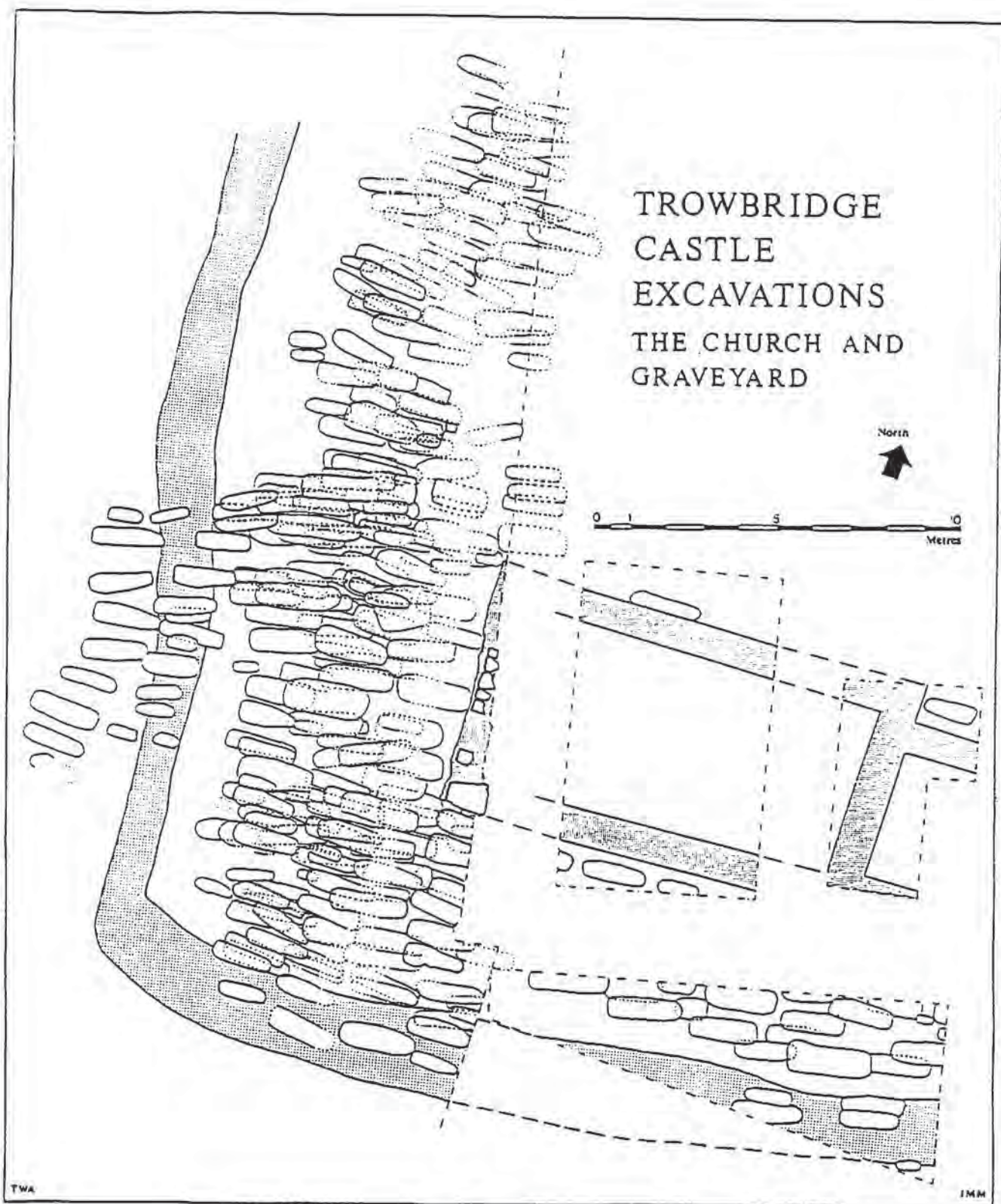


Fig. 6. The Church and graveyard; showing all graves.

The two groups of graves outlined in bold line are; to the north, ones that cut the clay of the castle bank; to the South, ones that cut through the clay from the levelling of the castle bank.

Seven graves were found, however, which definitely cut through this clay (also recorded in the 1977 excavations around the church). These lay specifically to the south-west of the church (Fig. 6, in bold line), which may therefore have still been in use. The end of the use of the church as such was suggested by changes recorded in the structure of its western wall. Though the evidence was limited, a hearth and chimney breast seem to have been built into the wall suggesting the secularisation of the building. The earliest known fabric of the existing parish church of Trowbridge is believed to be early 13th-century, and it was probably at this date that the the old church and graveyard were abandoned, to be re-established in the centre of the growing village or town, to the north of the site of the castle.

#### The Later Medieval Castle.

All the excavated evidence suggests that the castle was not maintained as a defensive structure much beyond the 12th century. The levelling of its Inner Bailey bank has been mentioned, and this may have been contemporary with the deliberate infilling of its moats. The site of the castle did however remain to dominate the layout of the medieval town, and it is known to have remained in the possession of men of power and influence. Throughout the archaeological work in Trowbridge, however, Leland's description in 1540 of a castle with seven towers has been enigmatic, as no archaeological evidence of a stone castle has ever been found. Was Leland actually referring to a ruined manor house on the site of the castle ? Traces of such a building may have been found

in the southern part of the 1938 excavations, being the base of a large rubble footing (Fig. 5, 9). This represented two walls, forming the corner of a substantial building, or walled enclosure.

#### References.

Canham, R., in preparation, Trowbridge Castle Excavations 1977.

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Davies, S.M. and Graham, A.H., Excavations in Trowbridge 1986-1987, unpublished Trust for Wessex Archaeology interim report.\*

\* Copies of these reports are available from the Trust.

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The credit for both the quality and quantity of the archaeological work, rests entirely with the excavation team (I don't know how we did it, but it was a good crack); John Wilson, Steve Tatler, Dave Brooks, Robin Jackson, Jackie Stanswood, Kevin Ritchie, Rod Brook, Luke Fagan, Paul 'Cedric' Pearce, Gayle Readman, James Wright, Anthony Lea, Philip Davies, Nick Plunkett, Andy Rochester, Marek Lewcun, John Liddieth, Jamie Le Notre, Goav, Anthony Rogers, Steve Eddleston, and on finds Elaine Wakefield and Angela Whitworth, with the Tuesday Evening Group washing the skeletons. Mel Stone and Jo Mills, who also drew Fig. 6, helped as volunteers. Last but not least, thanks to Peewee and Jim, for the water, and to Stukeley the dog for being there.



Plate 1. General view of the excavations, looking North towards Home Mills.



Plate 2. General view of the excavations, looking South from the vantage point of the Home Mills' roof; scales 2m.. The Graveyard during excavation is central, with one of the concentrations of skeletons *in situ*. The stone blocks of the west wall of the church can be seen along the east side of the excavation.



Plate 3. The Early Medieval Enclosure ditch, with entranceway. Looking West, scales 2m. The post-holes and soils pre-dating the ditch can also be seen.



Plate 4. The south-west part of the graveyard. Looking West, scales 2m. To the right is the larger corner-stone of the church. Top left is the northern part of the medieval enclosure ditch. The burials to the left encroach upon the graveyard boundary ditch.



Plate 5. Superimposed burials to the West of the Church, showing extensive redeposition of human bones; scale 0.30m. The woman in the centre, with her head supported by three skulls, died in childbirth; the bones of the foetus lie in the pelvis.



Plate 6. The Hunch-back; scale 0.10m. The pronounced curvature of the spine can be seen, and most of the vertebrae are fused together. :



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