

CHOLSEY VICARAGE

TRIAL EXCAVATION APRIL 1992

On 7-8th April 1992 OAU excavated a trench across the footprint of the proposed new vicarage at Cholsey in advance of building work. The trench was aligned at a right angle to the Silchester-Dorchester Roman road which can be projected to run down the line of The Forty (Cholsey's main street) and across the vicarage site, crossing a brook which drains the land to the W at the foot of the Downs.

Mrs Judy Dewey, local historian, has provided a copy of a map of 1695 showing 'The Parsonage' on the site of the present vicarage and an open area to the N where the new development is proposed. She has also provided a copy of some notes by Revd E C Hyde, the previous vicar, who claimed to have seen a road surface when the existing vicarage was built in the 1930s (attached). These notes refer to an air photo taken by the Ordnance Survey c 1940 (OS Berks 22) which showed clearly the line of the Roman road both S and N of the village. The above details are repeated in I D Margary, Roman Roads in Britain (1967) 165-6. There is a house on Church Road just NW of the present site which is called Causeway House, previously just 'The Causeway', which implies that the point where the Roman road met the brook was wet enough to require a causeway at least later.

Field Investigation

The trench was machine-excavated to a depth of approximate 0.6 m., with a deeper sondage at each end of the trench to sample the the lower deposits.

The topsoil (1, 0.28 m. deep) overlay 3, a dark grey silty layer, which contained large cobbles. This may have been a courtyard surface relating to the parsonage which preceded the present vicarage. At the east end of the trench a steep-sided pit (12) was partially revealed, packed with similar cobbles and limestone fragments (presumably the courtyard metalling had been re-used as the fill for a soakaway).

Beneath 3 was 4, a medium grey silty clay layer 0.26 m. deep, containing medieval tile and pottery. Three pits had cut through this horizon (8, 10 and 14), and also a broad ditch (9 see below). No finds were recovered from Pit 14 as most of it was machined away in digging the E sondage.

The ditch (9) was oriented NE-SW, 3.75 m. wide and 0.7 m. deep, the bottom being cut into the top of a peat layer (6, see below). Apart from tile and pottery fragments a short piece of timber was recovered from the deeper levels of the ditch.

Beneath the medieval silty layer 4 were the presumed periglacial deposits 5, 6, 7 and 16. Uppermost at the E end of the trench was a thin compact layer of sand, fine gravel and flint chippings (16). 5 beneath it was a white chalky silt layer up to 0.45 m. deep, which overlay 6, a layer of firm compressed plant debris or peat, 0.1 m. deep in the W sondage and 0.2 m. deep to the E. Beneath the peat was 7, a light grey clay layer identified in the W sondage but not excavated, presumed to be bedrock.

Finds

Four contexts produced finds, the earliest being Ditch 9. Pottery identifications were confirmed by Maureen Mellor, including several pieces of a 13th-century glazed pitcher, probably from a source in the Newbury area (Fabric Ox AG), and two sherds of a cooking pot tempered with flint and limestone (Fabric Ox AQ), typical of the locality. From the pits (8 and 10) cut into the ditch fill came sherds of similar type, but 10 included two cooking pot sherd in a predominantly sandy fabric known from Wallingford, and a base-angle sherd of a Surrey white-ware vessel of 14th-15th-century type. Finally

the buildup layer above all these features (4) included roof tile and the full range of fine and coarse wares, the only sherd not being of medieval type being a fragment of an 18th-century red earthenware vessel.

The environment of the peat deposit

Mark Robinson studied a sample of the peat deposit and found it to be largely Carex with large numbers of seeds of the bog bean (.....), also Stellaria and a single weevil of a type which feeds on marsh and aquatic plants. The vegetation was all of 'low growing' type, probably an extensive stand because of the limited number of species, and it might be some distance from dry ground because of the absence of tree debris. He concluded that it was likely to be a cold climate assemblage, probably Devensian. He asked for a column through the deposit for Adrian Parker of the School of Geography who is working on this period.

Discussion

The environmental results from the peat deposits would tend to support the idea that the thick layer of chalky silt was hill-wash of periglacial date, which would have stabilised by the time of the Roman road, to the extent that it would have appeared to be dry ground. It is therefore difficult to see the peat as a reason in itself for the Roman road having diverted, but it is clear that there might have been a narrower or easier crossing just upstream, made shorter by being at right angles to the brook.

The upshot is that, although we cannot be sure that the Roman road is not some considerable way to the E of the present trenches, the simplest model for Cholsey's plan is that the Roman road from Silchester followed its straight path along the main street of Cholsey, then diverted along the line of what is now Church Road to cross an area of low ground, and returned to its original line to the N. Cholsey church would thereby be at the N end of this Roman crossing, perhaps at the point where the road had returned towards its original course. Cholsey would then have developed as a bifocal settlement at either end of some sort of causeway. The reason for the vicarage occupying the opposite end of the causeway from the church may simply result from the need to put some space between itself and the grange of Reading Abbey beside the church itself. If (as it appears) the vicar had the larger proportion of the tithe, the early vicarage may have been a substantial building, perhaps at the angle of the Forty and the Wallingford Road. The medieval ditch (9) may be an early N boundary to the vicarage, or possibly a water supply, while the pits (8 and 10) show that the ditch was infilled in the medieval period and activity had extended over it.

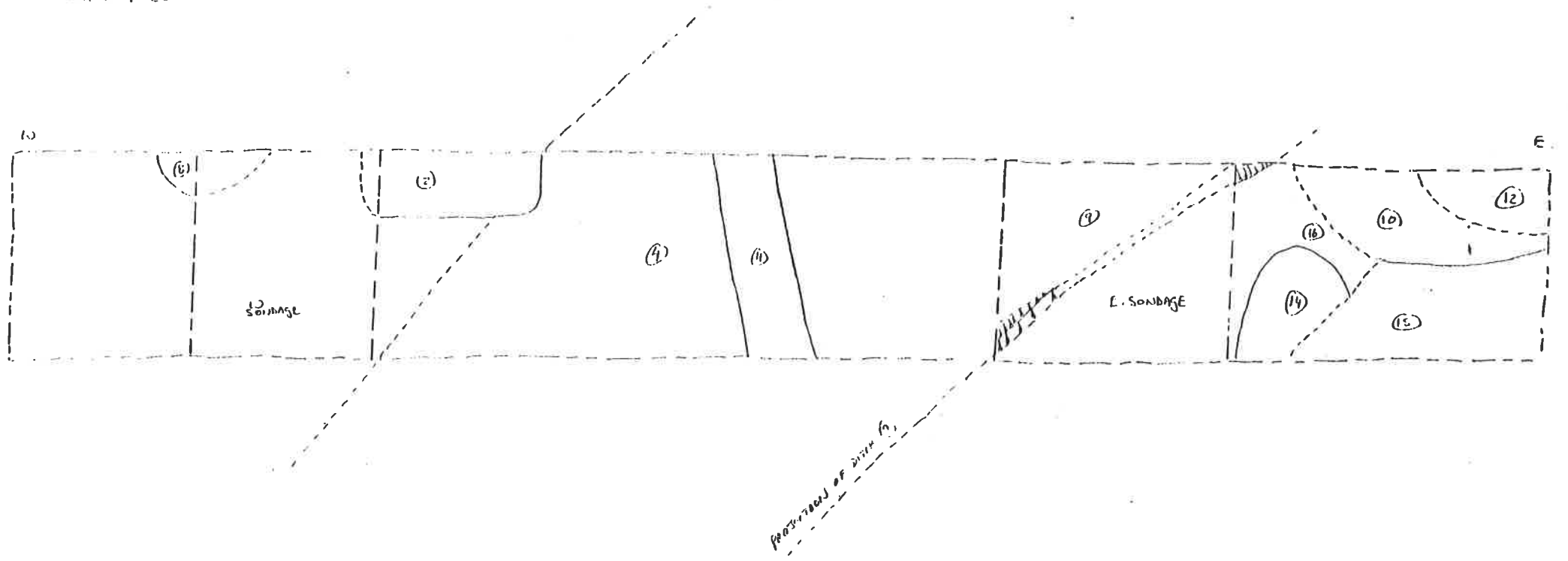
Conclusions

This fieldwork has demonstrated medieval activity on the site of what may have been a prosperous vicarage, at a point where the topographical line of an important Roman road had evidently been diverted to cross a low-lying area. It has thereby added significantly to the understanding of the early development of what was to become (on the evidence of the largest barn in England) an exceptionally wealthy parish.

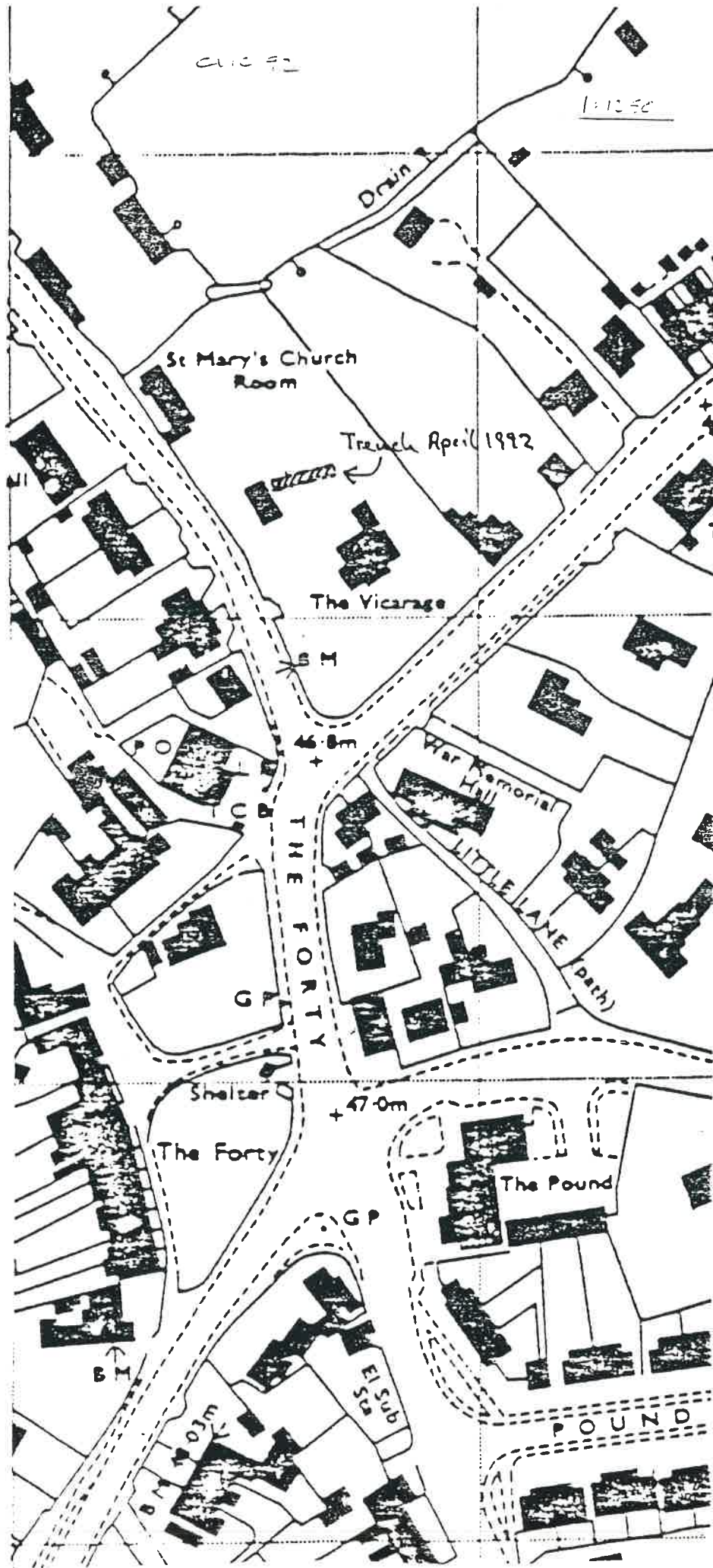
BGD 30 April 1992



CIVIL 12
 GENERAL PLAN
 SHEET 1 OF 2



POSITION OF DITCH IN



Cholesey
 Vicarage
 1992
 Trench
 Location

