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THE DUKE PLACE EXCAVATIONS ON THE SITE OF THE NORTH WESTERN CORNER OF THE LATER FORTS

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INTRODUCTION

The cul-de-sac known as Duke Place, which lies off Liverpool Road, overlies part of the north-western corner of the Roman fort (fig 3.1). In 1975 Turner and Newall Limited redeveloped the northern side of Duke Place as a small factory to replace an existing warehouse and factory on the site. As the latter contained an extensive basement, it was not expected that appreciable, let alone very informative, archaeological information might be forthcoming. In the event nothing could be further from the truth. Despite the degree of deep cellaring a limited area of stratigraphy survived almost to modern street level providing the most informative section of the defences yet recovered from the Roman fort. The results confirmed and, at the same time, served to explain, certain features partly recorded but not understood during Bruton's (1909) exploration of an area south of Duke Place, in the early years of this century (fig 3.2).

The rescue excavation revealed the most detailed information so far on the development of the

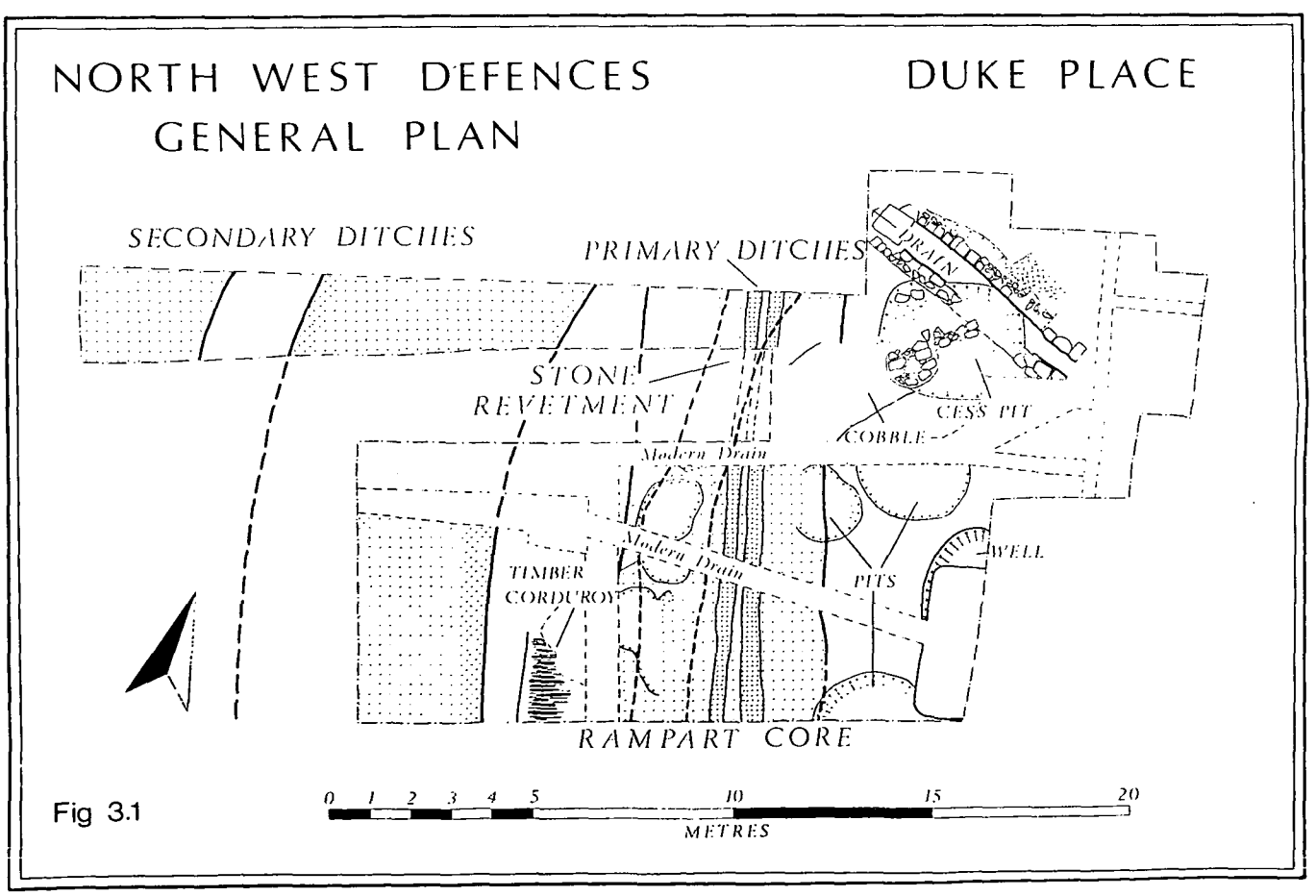

Fig 3.1

defences and indeed, an expansion of the size of the fort. The full implication of many of these results was not clear until extensive examination of the Northgate area in 1979, when a fuller sequence of the late history of the defences was recovered. The report presented here is an edited version of the interim report produced in 1979.

SUMMARY

The earliest evidence for Roman activity, on an apparently unused site, took the form of quarry pits spaced at random across the excavated area. The simplest explanation of this discovery is that the pits were dug to provide material for the construction and maintenance of the rampart of the fort. This phase is designated Phase 0, and can be dated to the earlier Flavian phase, AD 69-96, thus confirming a foundation date in the 70s of the 1st century AD.

The pits were loosely backfilled or cut away when a ditch running parallel to the western defences was dug across the site in Phase 1a. It had

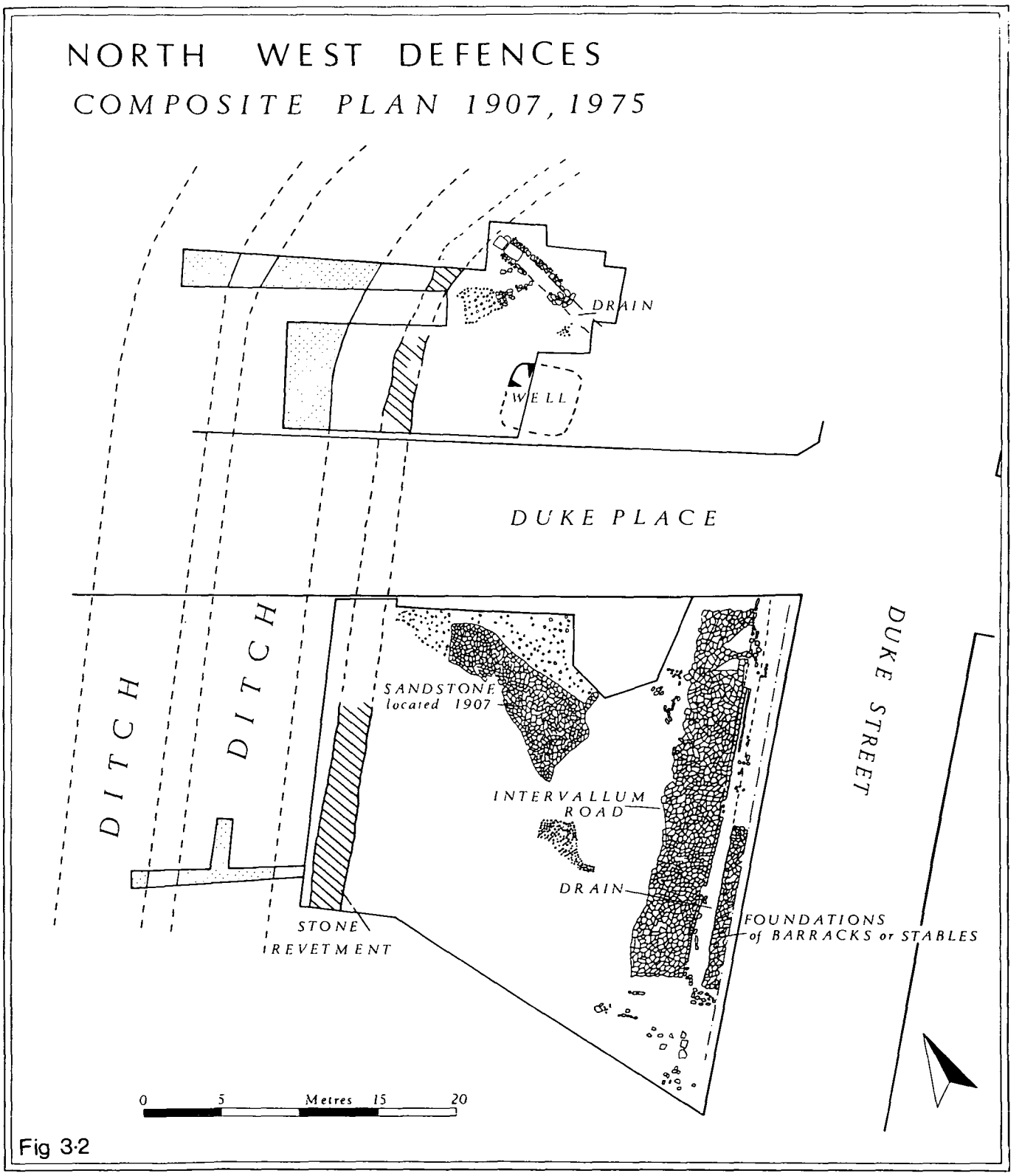

Fig 3·2

steeply sloping sides and an "ankle-breaker" sump, and stayed in operation until its sump was recut forward of the original line, ie to the west (Phase I). Examination of the internal eastern edge, however, failed to reveal any trace of an associated rampart to the rear. The location of these primary ditches therefore implied that they belonged to a smaller fort, although it was not possible to demonstrate this within the area excavated in 1975. Bruton's (1909, plan III, Section AA) excavations at the beginning of this century, however, show in section the presence of a double depression Phase 2 that may readily be interpreted as a W-shaped ditch sealed beneath later timber and stone barracks. The original primary rampart associated with these ditches must, therefore, lie beneath Duke Street. The evidence from 1975, however, explains the features unrecognised in earlier work. The equivalent of the western inner ditches has now been located in several places along the northern defences. If we assume that the other three sides of the fort followed the same lines as its successor, then its area can be calculated as 1.6ha (3.9 acres), as opposed to the 2ha (4.9 acres) of the later fort.

Once the relocated western rampart was established on the Duke Place site (Phase I) developments followed a predictable sequence. The turf and clay rampart was exceptionally wide to counter subsidence over the primary outer ditch. To assist this process the rampart toe was stabilised by layers of timber bracing the clay mass. A few features from Bruton's (1909, plan II) excavations of Duke Place can be seen to belong to a barrack or stable of this phase.

In Phase 2 the front was cut away to allow the insertion of a sandstone wall of which only the robbed subfoundation survived. The rampart itself could be followed round within the Duke Place site to the point where, just short of the north-western corner tower, a drain passed through the defences and out into the inner ditch. The different varieties of sandstone in the drain, one from Collyhurst, the other from the immediate vicinity of the fort, suggest a secondary repair to the wall. It ran back to the intervallum road, the edge of which was partly located.

Some time in the later life of the stone fort, a well was built between the edge of the intervallum road and the back of the rampart. Unfortunately the top of the structure and its stratigraphic relationship with the surrounding area did not survive, so that its dating is dependent on a terminus provided by the 3rd century pottery recovered from the deliberately backfilled shaft. This cannot be taken as necessarily proving an abandonment of the fort at the time because, in the case of a well, such a deliberate slighting might prove to be an isolated event. Again taking elements from Bruton's plan of features recovered on the south side of Duke Place, it is possible to suggest the outline of the stone building that lay across the intervallum road from the well.

THE EXCAVATION

Work commenced the week preceding Christmas 1974 and continued alongside the demolition of the warehouse until March 1975, within a rectangular area (figs 3.1 and 3.2) defined at the western end

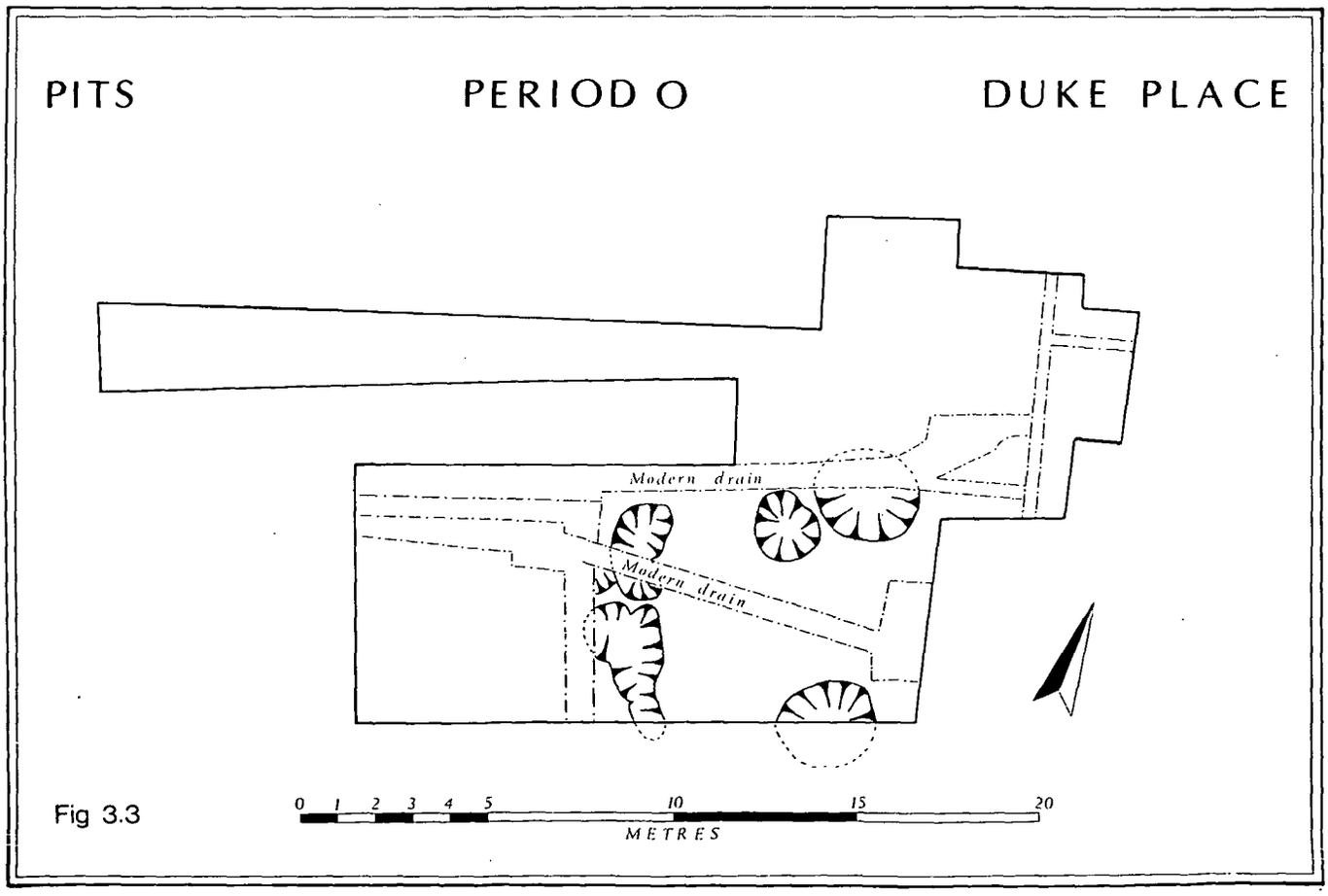

Fig 3.3

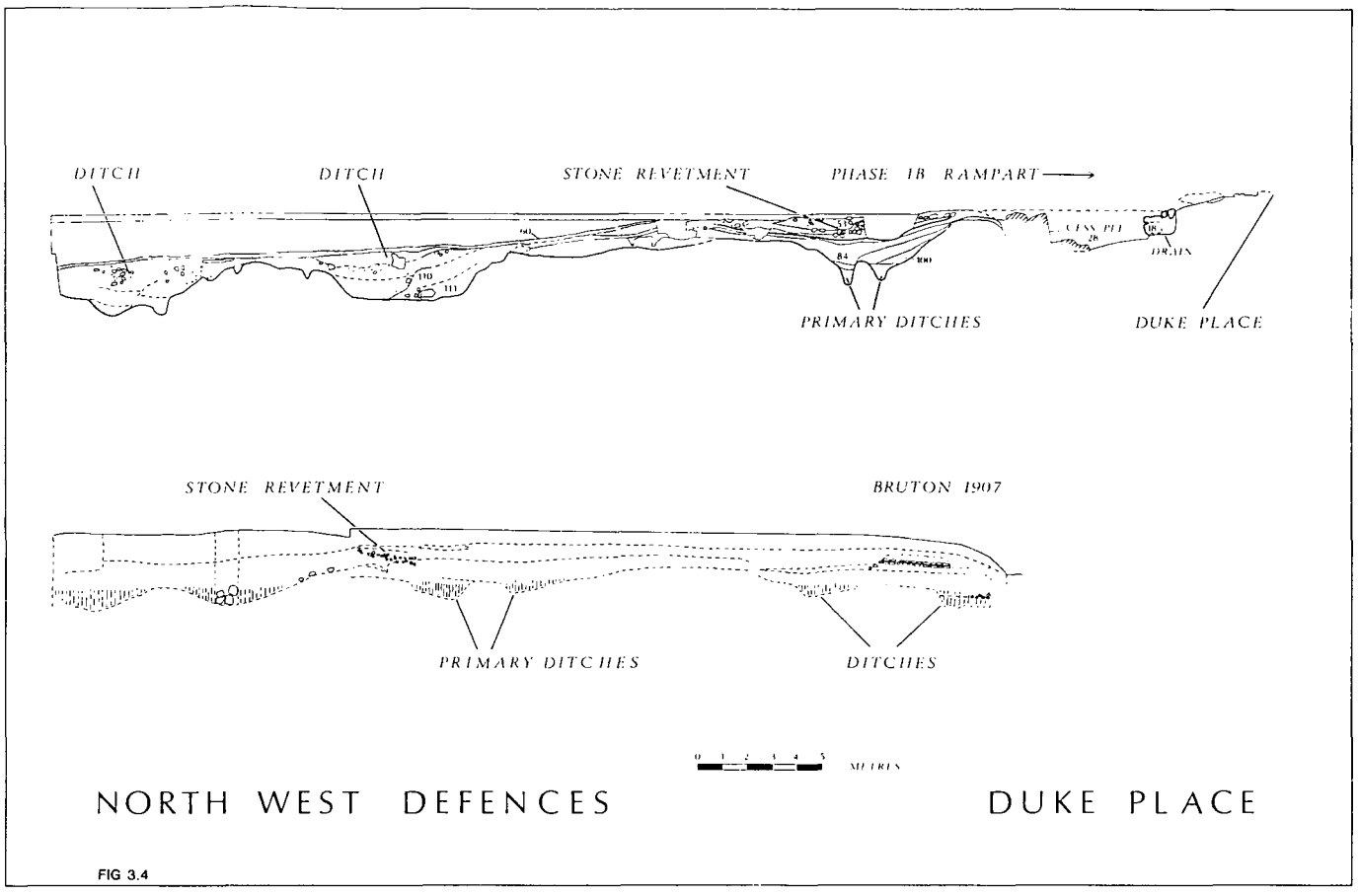

FIG 3.4

by an electricity sub station, to the east by the warehouse with its deep cellars, to the south by the Duke Place roadway, and to the north by the rear wall of a factory still operating in 1974. Initial machine testing at the south-western end of the site where Victorian housing had previously stood, revealed that demolition of areas already excavated, such as cellars, had destroyed any evidence that may previously have existed, and the area concerned (Trench I) was accordingly written off as archaeologically sterile.

PHASE 0: EARLY ACTIVITY (fig 3.3)
(A pre-Northgate phase)

The ditches cut through the earliest archaeological features on the site, namely a series of pits (fig 3.4). This relationship between the primary ditch sump and the pits indicates that the latter represent the earliest evidence of Roman activity upon the site, designated Phase 0. The origin of the pits lay in obtaining gravel for the core of the rampart of the early timber fort to the west.

Their remaining fills, which had escaped being truncated by either the primary or secondary sumps, seem similar and contemporary to each other, being lenses of grey brown sandy silt with various admixtures, and decomposed bone. In one case large amounts of charcoal or clinker were recovered along with apparent furnace fragments and this suggests that industrial activity was taking place during the construction of the fort.

PHASE 1a: THE EARLY DEFENCES (fig 3.5)
(Equivalent to Northgate fort (Areas A and B) Phases 1 and 2)

The history of the sumps of the early ditches discovered in 1975 calls for detailed comment. A re-appraisal of a section through the western ramparts, cut during Bruton's excavations to the south of Duke Place in 1907, provides the key to the interpretation of the section cut in the 1975 excavations. Bruton's section, which extended further to the east, shows two primary ditch profiles sealed beneath a later intervallum road. It also shows two other ditches further to the east, belonging to the early fort, which were not seen in 1975 because of the limited area available for excavation.

A comparison of the two sections (fig 3.4) led to the conclusion that the ditch profiles of the 1975 section represented the outer defences of the early and smaller fort, whilst the eastern-most ditches of Bruton's section belonged to the inner defences of the same phase. The deliberate back-filling of the primary ditches, as seen in the 1975 section, provides further evidence to support the suggestion that the early fort was originally smaller and was later expanded on its eastern side by the construction of a rampart over the primary outer ditches. The two early sumps (100 and 84) on the 1975 site contained deposits of rapid silting sealed by more detritus, whilst the upper levels of the ditches contained deliberate in-filling from demolition. In the north section of Trench II the primary sump (100) is U-shaped, measuring 0.64m in width at the top

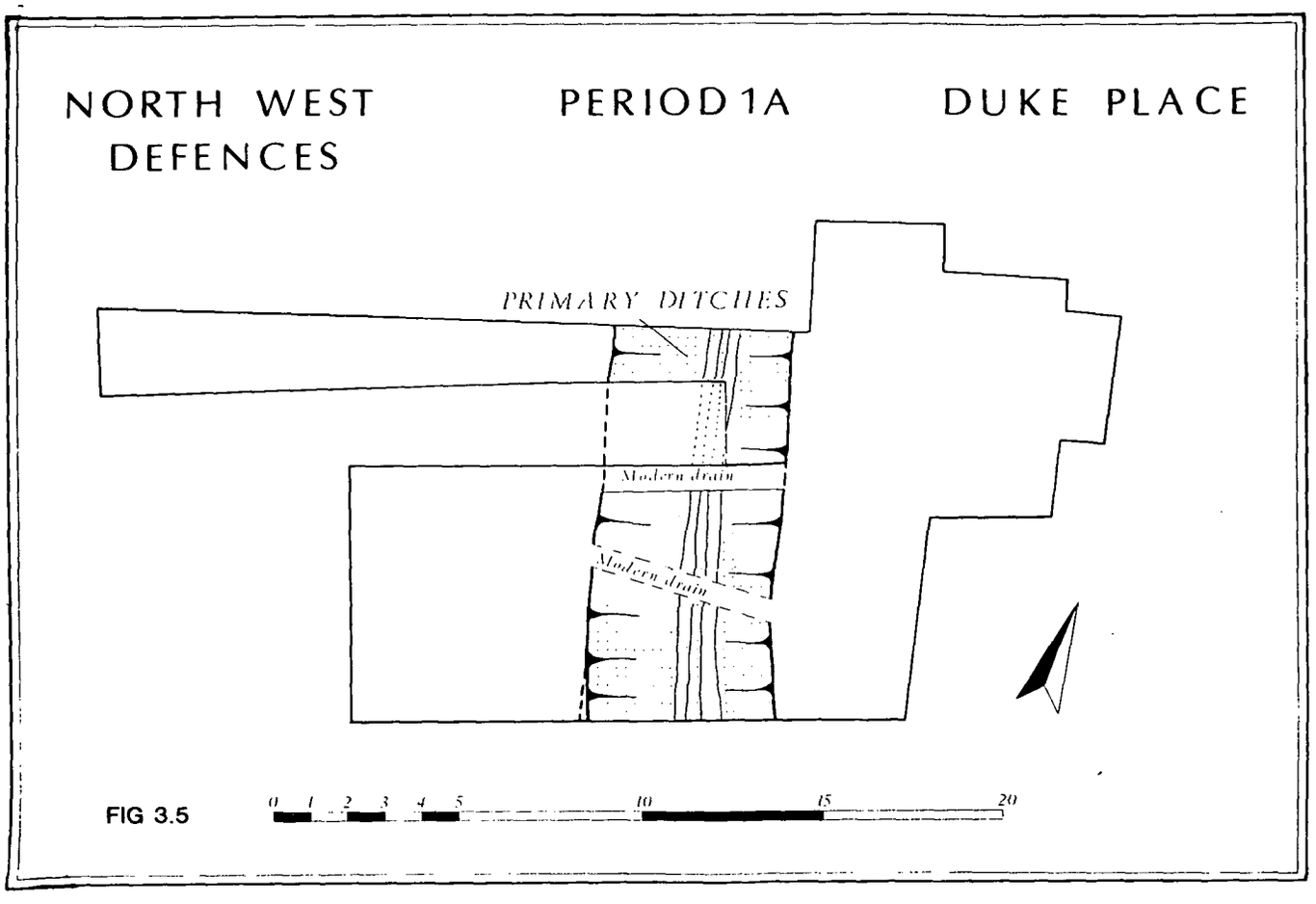

FIG 3.5

of the sump, 0.26m wide at the bottom and 0.4m in depth. The sump contained a grey sandy fill intermixed with pebble eroded from the upper sides of the ditch, with silting to a depth of 0.3m. The profile of the primary sump seen in another section appears to have undergone a re-cut in an apparent attempt to clear the sump of the ditch of silt. The sump was cut into the natural subsoil of orange sand and pebble.

The secondary sump (84) is cut into the natural subsoil with its lowest level filled with a heavy dark grey silt, and lumps of yellow and grey clay. The upper levels were filled with redeposited natural gravels. The level (5) sealing both primary and secondary ditches, is made up of a grey silt, with inclusions of charcoal specks, slight pebble, grits and dirty yellow clay.

Directly beneath this level 5, was a 0.05-0.1m layer of charcoal (found as a general level over the whole site) mixed with pebble, daub and grey clay specks, which appears to be a demolition deposit. A heavy charcoal deposit, seen in the middle of the primary ditch (100), indicates considerable destruction of timber material.

On evidence from various sections the primary ditch (100) appears to have had a brief existence. The absence of heavy silting, and the mixed fillings of natural material together with the pre-Roman top soil in the upper levels of this ditch, seem to indicate a short life and the deep layer of charcoal in its lower levels suggests some deliberate destruction perhaps of a temporary palisade.

The cutting of the primary ditch (100) by the secondary ditch (84), indicates the possibility of two phases; however the upper levels of both ditches are sealed by the same layer of grey silt (5).

Behind the ditch systems, towards the eastern extension of the area was an extensive scatter of turf that appears to belong to the levelled core of the primary (Phase 1a) rampart presumed to underlie Duke Street. What may be said with certainty, as seen in the upper levels of various sections, is that the levels containing turf and charcoal that seal the primary ditches represent the complete demolition of the Phase 1a fort.

PHASE 1b: THE LATER LARGE TURF AND TIMBER FORT (fig 3.6)
(Equivalent to Northgate fort (Areas A & B) Phase 3)

The construction of the Phase 1b western rampart and defences and the demolition of the previous Phase 1a fort, appear to represent an extension of the fort to the west, and involved a deliberate seal of clay (Phase 3a) preparatory to the laying of a turf rampart core rafted on a timber bed to brace the rampart mass. The sequence of construction was as follows; firstly a timber corduroy of strapping (126) acting as bedding for the rampart core, which was sealed in turn by a bonding of light grey clay, further timber strapping, more grey clay and finally an uppermost surviving timber strapping of the Phase 1b clay rampart front (122). The highest level consisted of the remains of the clay turf stacking of the

rampart front, mixed with grey clay and sandy silt, interspersed with decomposed timber bracing. Several ephemeral postholes to the east of the rampart frontage cutting the western lip of the outer secondary ditch of Phase Ia may be the remains of an upright timber bracing to the rear.

To the west of the Phase Ib rampart the inner-most ditch appeared to have been cut and recut in triplicate into the natural sandstone bedrock. This frequent recutting indicates attempts to prevent silting and the clearance of accumulated rubbish. The upper filling of the ditch (110) appeared to incorporate some Phase 2 material and contained large deposits of modern silting, some worked stone and dumping to a depth of 2m. At the lower level beneath 110, level 111 contained 0.3m of silting consisting of weathered pebble and light grey brown silt.

Further west two other ditches were seen in section, forming the outer defences of Phase Ib and 2 defence systems.

The Cess Pit

Feature 28 was rectangular in plan and was located in the extension of Trench II. It contained a lower filling of mixed animal manure, whilst its upper levels were backfilling of broken sandstone and cobble representing infilling and levelling. It was observed that the cess pit lay directly beneath the southern structural wall of a later stone drain of the Phase 2 fort, and would therefore appear to be sealed by Phase 2 thus fixing the cess pit to Phase Ib.

PHASE 2: THE STONE FORT (fig 3.7)

(Equivalent to Northgate fort (Areas A and B) Phase 4)

(a) The Stone Wall and Rampart

The reconstruction of the front of the Phase 2 rampart becomes apparent in the uppermost level of 121, where the rampart front appears to have been pushed into the earlier ditches leaving a layer (60) of rampart material. Evidence for the addition of a sandstone revetment appears in the highest levels.

The method of construction for the stone rampart's revetment was seen only in section. The wall consisted of a cobble foundation set in a grey silt mixed with grey clay specked with charcoal deriving from the demolition of and robbing out of the rampart frontage (53 robber trench). The lowest layer of the wall itself consisted of a bed of local Collyhurst sandstone set in lime mortar.

At one point the construction trench 53 for the Phase 2 revetment foundations has been completely robbed out, leaving a fill of decomposed orange brown sandstone with some grey brown silt charcoal and mortar fragments (Northgate Phase 6 or later).

(b) The Stone Drain

The drain (18) exhibited two construction phases. The major portion was constructed in red sandstone, identified as originally having been

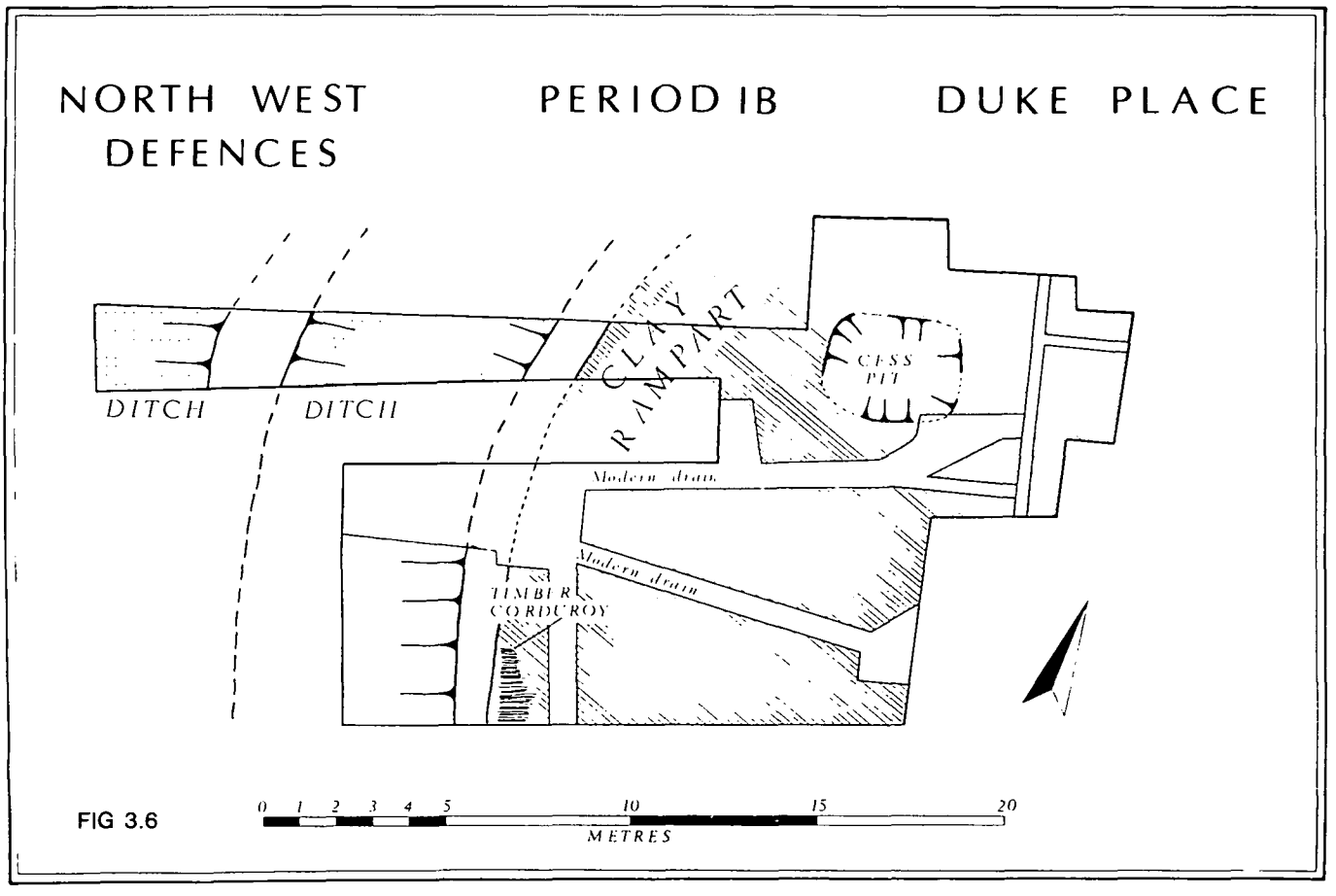

FIG 3.6

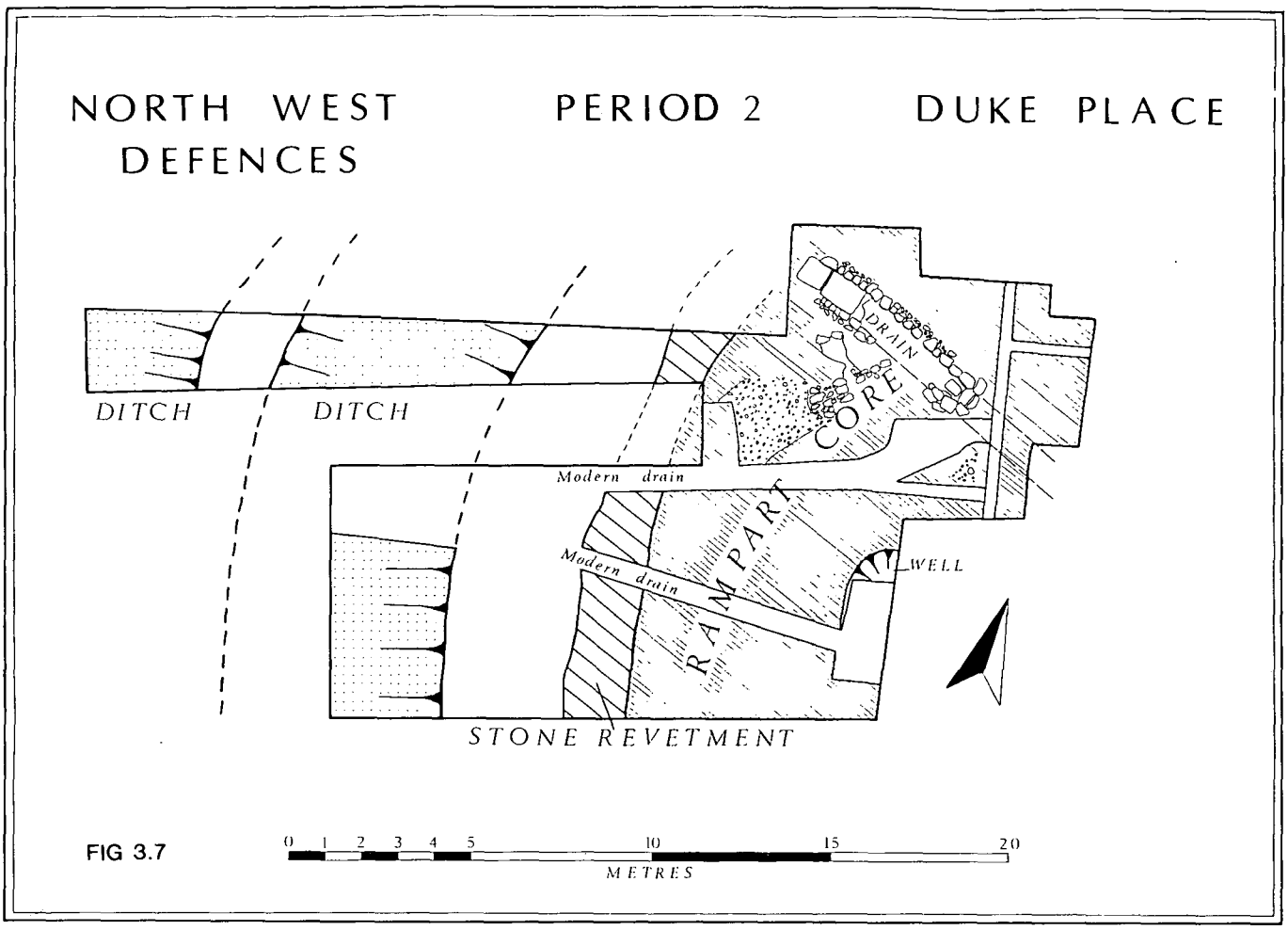

FIG 3.7

quarried from the area of Collyhurst, the inference being that the local sandstone was of a poorer quality. The southern wall of the drain lay over, and had largely collapsed into, the earlier cess pit (28) discussed above. During excavations one of the surviving lower blocks was seen to bear the mark of a mason's arrow, perhaps indicating the outward direction of flow. Made of well-cut ashlar blocks normally measuring approximately 0.4m by 0.35m, set into a construction trench, however, the superstructure of the drain had collapsed because of the subsidence into the backfilled cess pit (28) already mentioned. The main fill of the drain consisted of robbed out sandstone fragments and mortar. The flagstone floor was also robbed out but a gravel build-up over the flagstones indicated that successive floors may have been laid to compensate for the subsidence. The drain was probably covered with flagstone capping.

The inner and apparently primary section of the drain (shaded on fig 3.7) was built of local bunter sandstone and was choked with a fill of gravel derived from the intervallum road; consisting of large and small cobbles mixed with grits and a grey green silt to 0.06-0.08m in depth. Beneath the intervallum fill lay flagstone paving, with extensive staining from the effluent.

It is suggested that the inner drain was the first of a two-phase structure and that the cess pit 28, was filled in prior to laying the new section (18) designed to carry the effluent out of the fort area, into the River Medlock flowing at the bottom of the hill upon which the fort was situated.

To the south-west of the drain lay sandstone ashlar blocks set in a lime mortar (fig 3.7) laid upon a cobble surface. These formed a two-phase foundation for presumably a buttress designed to support the drain. Next to this, to the west, lay a spread of mixed large and small cobble set in a grey silt deposit containing fragments of decomposed sandstone. This layer, which varied in depth from 0.05m to 0.2m formed the base for the rampart of the earlier Phase Ib fort, (Northgate fort Phase 3).

(c) The Well

The well cut through all the Roman levels on the site and therefore must be regarded as the latest Roman remain discovered.

Initially appearing as a large pit, its eastern-most profile was sealed under the ferro-concrete of the modern warehouse floor, and could not be fully excavated because of demolition operations. The well shaft was formed by timber uprights at four corners joined to each other by horizontal timbers. These timbers were fastened to the uprights by the use of dovetail joints and wooden pegs. The well sump, which was U-shaped in profile, was cut into the natural sandstone and its bottom was below the present water table level. The timber strapping at its lowest levels rested on a small raft of branches and cut twigs,

laid directly onto the natural sandstone, and was sealed by a packing of clean grey clay (128) rammed against the outer sides of the lining, thus forming a watertight seal to protect the well timbers. Above the clay proofing and at the bottom of the well pit, around the outer timbers of the well's interior, a stone revetment lent additional support. Above it and sealing the outer timbers of the well pit, a further proofing of chocolate-brown clay encased the outer well timber walls.

After the initial emptying of the uppermost levels of the interior of the well it became apparent that the well had been back-filled during the Roman period. The filling that lay on the same level as the top of the sandstone contained a silt deposit made up of grey black brown silt, small amounts of clay and partially decomposed organic remains that included branches and twigs. This layer, which also contained some pottery, appears to have been the result of a gradual accumulation of rubbish. Immediately above it lay a waterlogged deposit consisting of charcoal, cobbles and very large sandstone blocks, that appears to have been deliberately dumped in an attempt to backfill the well. On top of this lay further deposits of cobble and sandstone fragments, that also represent deliberate dumping in the Roman period, the top of which had been cut by a modern drain.

The narrow construction pit of the well, that was dug in order to facilitate the building of the shaft, was filled with tipped layers of gravel, cobble, sandstone fragments and layers of dirty grey clay.
From the backfilling of the well came 3rd century pottery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The full records of the excavations are held in the Manchester Museum and the Department of Archaeology, University of Manchester.