

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION: LADYPLACE GARDENS, ALTON, HAMPSHIRE

INTRODUCTION

Site watching by Mr John Perrin in the Spring of 1988 located a Roman ditch or pit on the 'Cobbers' building development, Lenten Street, Alton. Mr Perrin recovered a large quantity of Roman roof, flue and pilae tiles and pottery from the bottom of this feature and also noted that the pit or ditch appeared to continue under Lady Place public gardens, immediately to the south of the building site. The material recovered almost certainly represents demolition rubble from a substantial Roman building with a hypocaust heating system and tiled roof. Finds of Roman material have previously been reported from the grounds of 'Cobbers' and indeed from elsewhere in the general area and these finds are detailed in the appendix.

As a result of Mr Perrin's discoveries, Alton Town Council was approached for permission to carry out a geophysical survey in the gardens themselves. This survey appeared to confirm that the ditch continued under the gardens, and in view of the fact that the SEB were due to carry out a cable-laying operation through the area, the Council was kind enough to give permission for small-scale archaeological excavation of the site in advance of this work.

THE EXCAVATION

The excavation was carried out by members of the Alton History and Archaeology Society and The Farnham and District Museum Society, over the weekend of 6th and 7th August 1988. Two trenches (nos. 1 & 2, see plan) were opened up along the line of the proposed cable and were sited to coincide with features revealed on the adjacent building development (see location plan).

The work showed that the ground had been extensively disturbed, presumably by gardening activities, and that the top 50cm of soil (100 & 200, see trench plans) contained a jumbled mixture of occupation debris dating from the Roman period onwards.

Underlying the topsoil level were the fragmentary remains of at least two insubstantial Roman buildings and in one case, an associated external cobbled surface. The first of these buildings (105) consisted of two walls forming a right angle, of which only the base of the footing trench remained, the building material itself having been robbed out in antiquity. The second structure (102) consisted of a flint wall of which only a small section intruded into the trench. The cobbled surface (106), together with a second one (202) revealed in trench 2, were very disturbed and fragmentary, but nonetheless produced a light scatter of Roman roof tile, tesserae, wall mortar (opus signinum), pottery, bone etc. A preliminary examination of the pottery would date this level to the mid third century A.D. Given the requirement to restrict the trenches to a width of 2m, it was not possible to uncover more than a small proportion of each structure, but it seems unlikely that either had been substantial enough to have been the source of the tile, tesserae etc. These must therefore have come from some other larger building in the vicinity.

The finds from below the Roman cobbled surfaces, included a number of sherds of grey flint tempered coarseware pottery, which are likely to date to the end of the Iron Age and indicate that the site was occupied during that period.

The supposed Roman ditch revealed by the geophysical survey, in the event turned out to be a natural feature, probably a filled-in stream bed (underlying 103) dating to the end of the last Ice Age. By chance, this had had Mr Perrin's Roman feature dug into it in the adjacent 'Cobbers' site, thus giving the misleading impression that the Roman feature continued under the gardens.

CONCLUSIONS

The excavation has confirmed that Roman structures exist under this section of the public gardens, but that these are, unfortunately, very disturbed and are unlikely to justify any further archaeological investigation. The structures themselves may well represent the remains of Roman agricultural buildings of the type usually associated with villas, (each Roman villa was basically a farm and, in addition to the main domestic buildings, had numbers of smaller structures, such as grain stores, small barns, etc, to the rear). It therefore seems certain that a substantial Roman building, probably a villa, existed somewhere within 300-400m of the excavation site (possibly under some other part of the public gardens). It is interesting to note that Roman and Iron Age material was discovered, at the turn of the century, during the construction of the nearby earth mound, which is still visible in the Public Gardens (see appendix 1).

The villa (?), however, appears not to lie in the path of the SEB cable and, given the damaged state of the Roman structures located during the excavation, it seems unlikely that the cable-laying operation will disturb any important archaeological remains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Alton Town Council for permission to carry out the work and Mr Kimble, the Town Clerk and his staff, for their help in arranging for admittance to the site. I am also grateful to Councillor Mann for supplying an SEB site plan and to the volunteer diggers: Dave Attryde, John Boas, Pat Croft, Paul Fenwick, Margaret Gross, Ivor Guy, Jane Hurst, Ray Newton, John Perrin, Mark Pike, Win Smith, Bob Stonnard, Gill Thorn, Tony Thorn, Keith Varney and Eric Waite. I should finally like to thank Dr June Chatfield for notifying members of the Alton History and Archaeology Society in advance of the excavation.

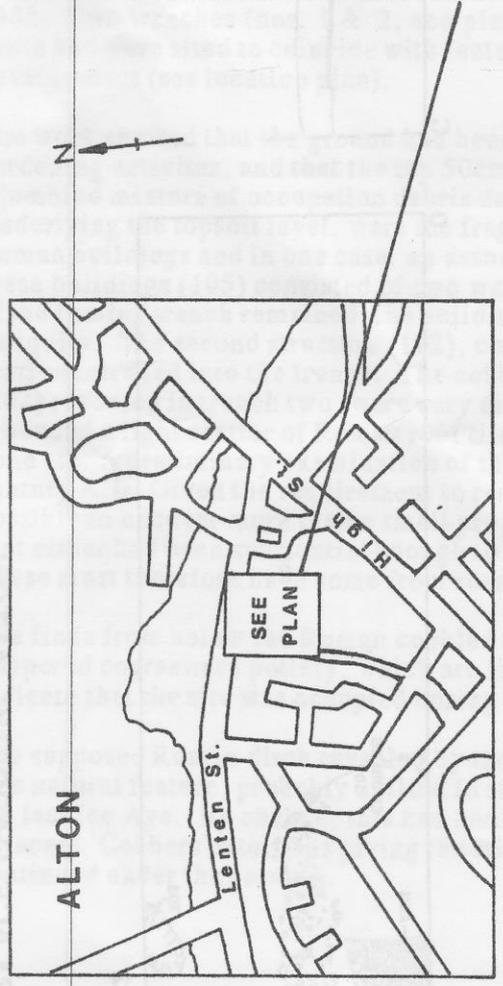
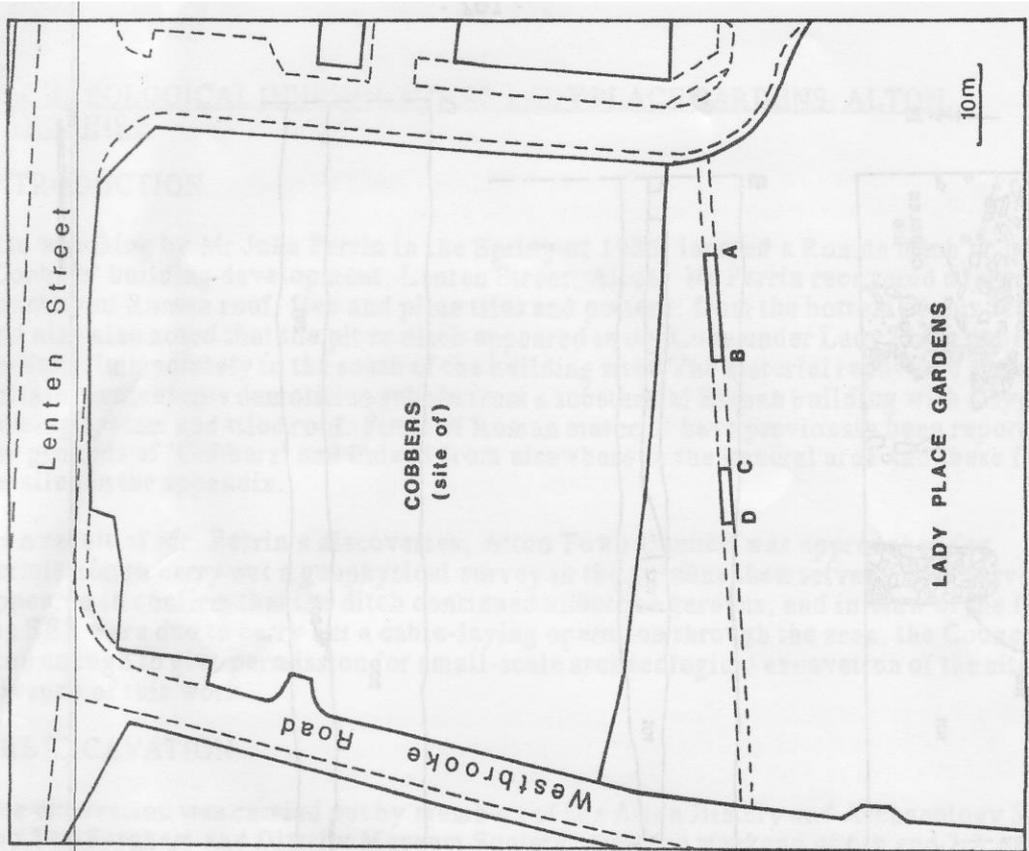
The site was visited by approximately 300 - 400 members of the public during the weekend, all of whom read the site notice information board and took the opportunity to handle some examples of Roman pottery and roof tile which were put on display for this purpose.

David Graham

APPENDIX

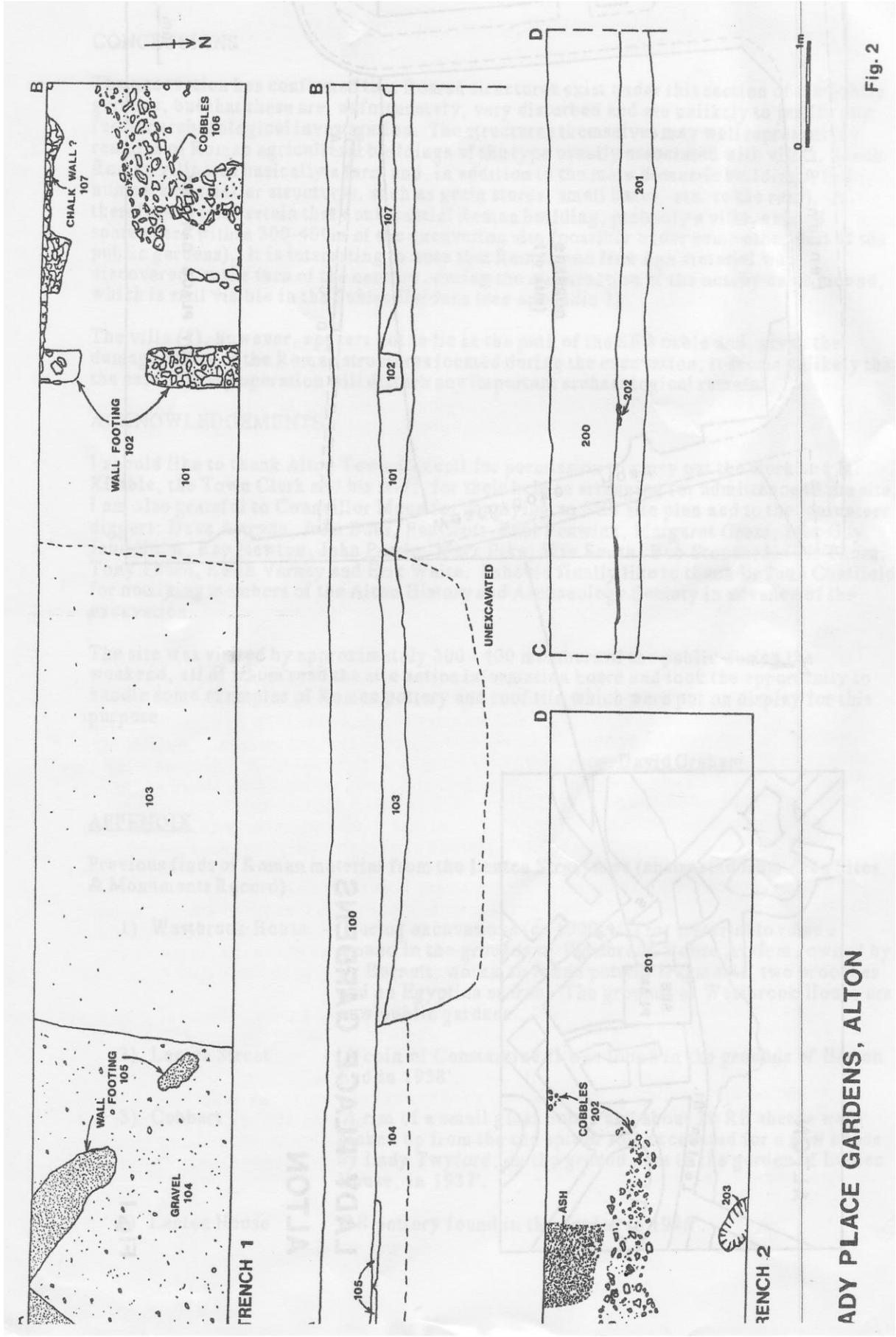
Previous finds of Roman material from the Lenten Street area (abstracted from Area Sites & Monuments Record):

- 1) **Westbrook House** 'During excavations (ca 1900 AD) for material to raise a mound in the grounds of Westbrook House Asylum, owned by Dr Burnett, workmen found pottery fragments, two brooches and an Egyptian scarab. The grounds of Westbrook House are now public gardens'.
- 2) **Lenten Street** 'A coin of Constantine II was found in the grounds of Barton End in 1938'.
- 3) **Cobbers** - 'A rim of a small glass bottle and about 20 RB sherds were picked up from the top spit of soil excavated for a new house by Lady Twyford, on the ground next to the garden of Lenten House, in 1937'.
- 4) **Lenten House** 'RB pottery found in the garden in 1946'.



LADY PLACE GARDENS
ALTON

Fig. 1



ADY PLACE GARDENS, ALTON

Fig. 2