

A Roman Farm at Castor, 1975

by John Peter Wild

A major sewer serving the Sutton industrial zone will pass one day through Ailsworth and Castor along the northern edge of Normangate Field. Excavations there in 1974-5 by Mr G. B. Dannell and the writer revealed a Roman farmyard and barn (fig. 19). They lie some 250 metres north of the core of the industrial complex known from our previous research (*Durobrivae* 2, 1974, 7, fig. 2).

We found evidence for three periods of Roman activity.

In the first period, before A.D. 150, a wide, but thinly metalled, drove-road with side-ditches was laid across the site. It led up from a network of minor roads linked to Ermine Street, and was flanked on either side by simple ditched enclosures.

In the second period (c. A.D. 150-200) the ditches were replaced by stout fences and a palisade. The western enclosure was divided to make two or perhaps three pens. Water tanks in the corners suggest that stock was kept there periodically.

Across the road at about the same time a timber barn was erected, measuring about 13 metres by 8 metres. Its weight was borne on six massive arcade-posts set in two rows of post-pits, which divided the interior into a nave and two aisles (fig. 19). This form of building was popular in the Nene Valley; for it was both cheap to build and infinitely adaptable (Wild (1974), 158ff.). Later ditches and a mediaeval furrow had removed the walls on three sides, but three post-holes of the southern wall remained. We might not have detected them, had we not guessed what kind of building we were dealing with.

The start of the third period (c. A.D. 200) was marked by the demolition of the barn and the fences. Very conveniently for us, when the posts were pulled out, a collection of datable household crockery was dropped down several of the empty post-holes.

During the third period, which spanned the third century, the only feature surviving in use was the road. Its surface was remetalled and its side-ditches cleaned out and re-dug. Our excavation was thin in terms of visual remains; but it gave us an insight into the pattern of

land-utilisation in the northern suburbs of Durobrivae.

Aerial photography by Mr S. G. Upex and Professor St Joseph shows that the land alongside Ermine Street and the minor roads was divided into allotments by a series of ditches (*Durobrivae* 2, 1974, fig. 2). The same picture emerges in greater detail from a magnetometer survey which was carried out down the projected axis of the 1975 drove-road. Our excavation indicates that at least part of this system of land-division must date to the earlier second century.

Who was behind this scheme of land-division, and why was it felt necessary? It would be reasonable to see the local council of the *vicus* of Durobrivae at work here, surveying, dividing and assigning plots of land. They may have been compelled to take this step because of disputes over property on the commercially attractive street-frontage of Ermine Street. Certainly, the plots here were in the hands of potters and metalworkers whose workshops we have found.

In 1970 and 1973 we learnt how religious buildings away from Ermine Street might become potter's workshops and that workshops might be converted into shrines (Dannell, Wild (1971), (1974)). Land-utilisation and building function were not static, nor in a thriving community could we expect them to be.

Bibliography

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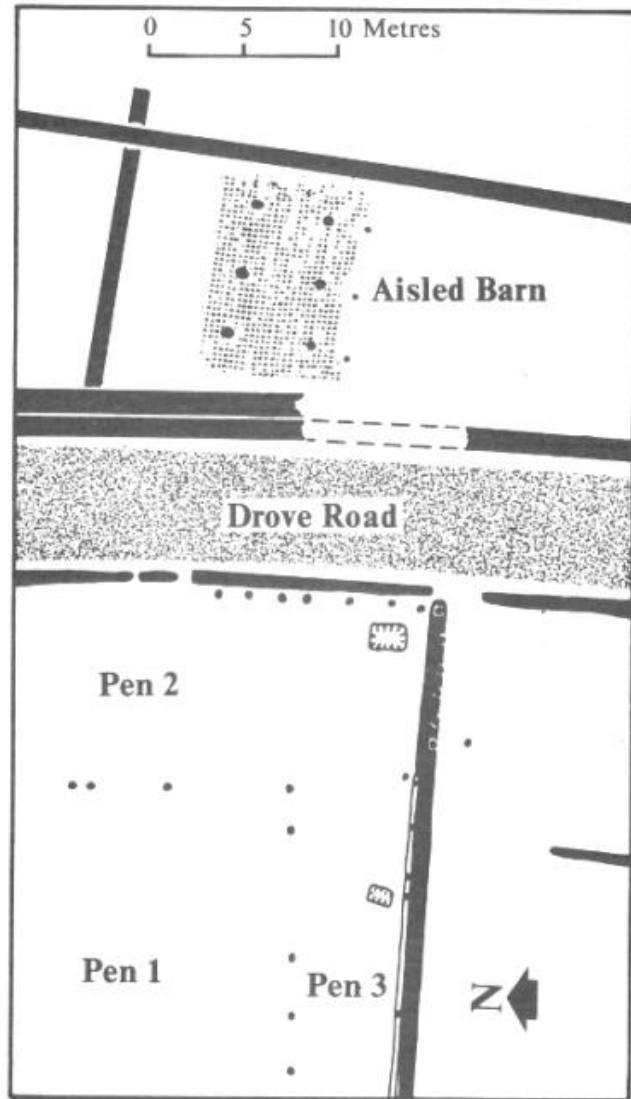


Fig 19 Plan of the 1975 excavations at Castor