

Excavations at Bridge Street, Peterborough

by Francis O'Neill

Excavations along the west side of Bridge Street (TL 19209834) between what was once Horry's drapery (no. 84) and Sturton's chemist shop (no. 78) took place from Summer 1975 to Winter 1976 on a plot of land vacant since 1928 when the last building was demolished (fig 18).

The site was dug, we hoped, to provide a ceramic sequence for Peterborough from mediaeval to modern times and to test the probable foundation date for the present town centre — reputedly planned by Martin de Bec (1133-55). The site lay on the original flood plain of the River Nene and was next to a causeway, now Bridge Street, which ran out to the river. It provided a suitable location for meeting both objectives stated above. The first has been achieved — with finds now in the process of being catalogued — and no evidence came to light to disprove the idea that there was a new town laid out in the twelfth-century.

Excavation was carried out within the confines of an east-west trench running along the middle of the plot (fig 18). The trench was 50m in length, 2m in width and ran from the street frontage to the end of the buildings shown on the 1:500 survey of 1884. The depth of the stratified deposits was, at the street front, 1.5m and, at the back, 2.25m. Most of the organic deposits were marked by an excellent state of preservation, and conditions here may well have been very like those at Brook Street, Winchester, where a gradually rising water-table inhibited the removal of accumulated floors and debris.

Although limited in size, the trench produced some good indications of the site's area-development in broad terms. At the bottom was found river silt with a high organic content. At the causeway end this peat-like silting, possibly as a result of tidal action up the Nene, rose to form a bank or platform some 16m wide — and this is presumed to

follow the causeway down to the river. On the bank and along the length of the trench were several tree stumps suggesting an over-all wooded area, possibly of alder and willow. As far as could be determined, the trees were cleared at one time and a north-south channel was cut, 18m from the causeway and 7m wide, apparently running parallel with the road from the river. This channel had been steyned with wattle along its eastern edge along the front of a clay bank. The purpose of the channel appears to have been for drainage as well as for access by boats up to the backs of the first tenements developing along the causeway which ran to a hythe on the river front. The new town layout with its port facilities points to the growing importance to Peterborough of trade.

The earliest timber building found was sited on the peaty bank and partially on the levelling-up deposit, and had its frontage 4m from the causeway. The earliest date which can be assigned to this, the beginning of the proper occupation, seems to be in the twelfth century. A period of optimum climate is recorded then for the British Isles, running from the middle of the twelfth into the thirteenth century. It may be significant that the beginning of the causeway and bank next to it seems to belong to the period prior to 1150, with the early tree phase and human occupation following immediately afterwards.

Over the course of the next 300 years the initial house area developed westwards over the channel, which had silted up after about 100 years. Initially, the steady colonisation took the form of minor timber structures. During the fifteenth century or early sixteenth century, stone was being used for footings and some walls, although there is good evidence for a timber-framed house of this period with jettied front over the street. The building survived in a mutilated condition until finally demolished in 1928. During the post-mediaeval period there were disturbances at the back of the plot in the form of drainage ditches. They ran north-south and east-west and were extensive enough to imply that a major drainage scheme was in operation, possibly due to climatic deterioration during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The major late mediaeval and post-mediaeval activity on the site seems to have been baking, and there was a feature belonging to the seventeenth century which can be interpreted as a donkey-mill. Nineteenth and twentieth-century site occupiers included coopers and tinsmiths.

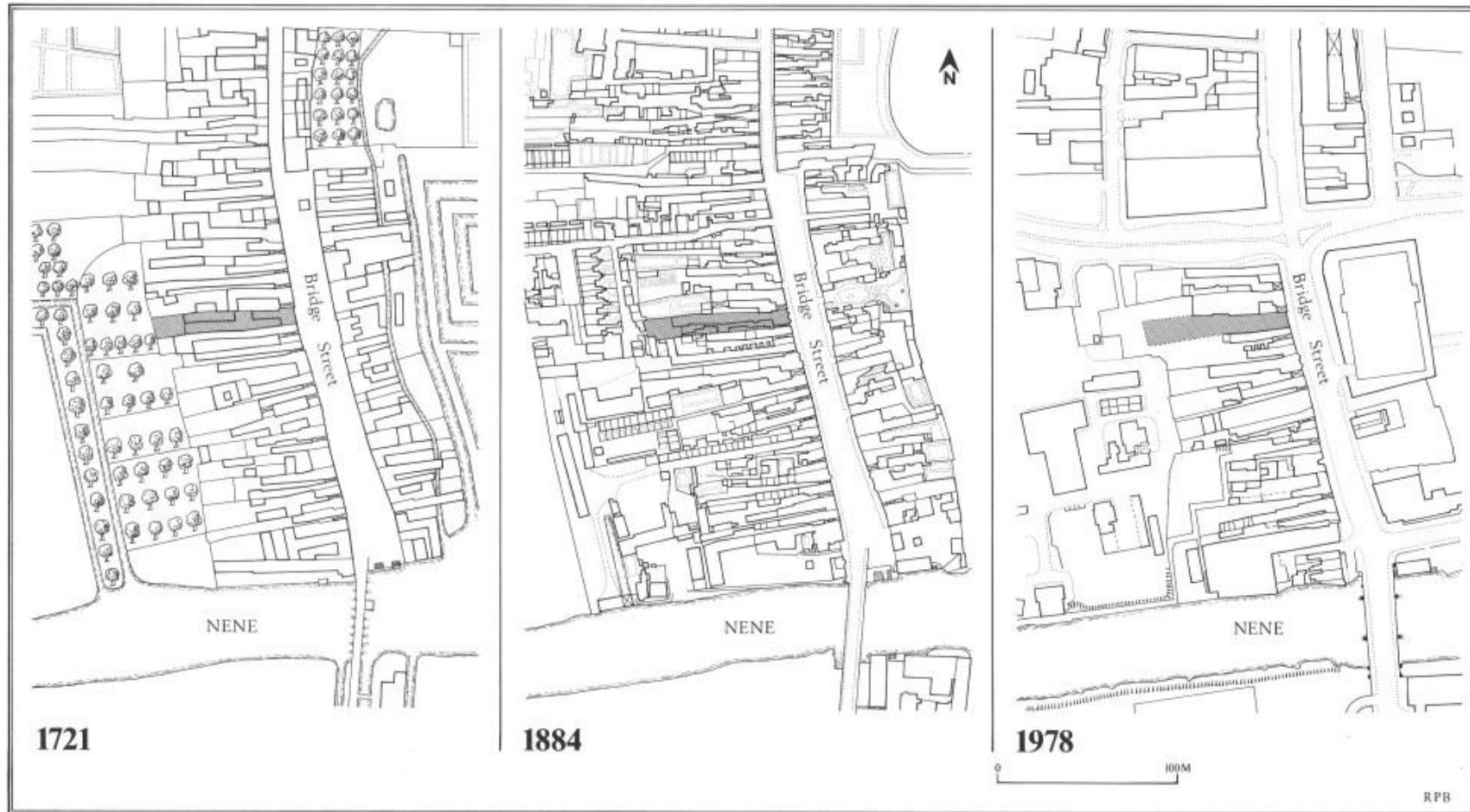


Fig 18 Bridge Street from 1721 to 1978 (excavation plot stippled)