



Humberside Archaeology

# River Head Excavations Grimsby 1989





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## Summary

Grimsby has long been a major port and market town, particularly during the early medieval period, but documentary information is scant and there has been little previous archaeological work in the town. The excavations by the Humberside Archaeology Unit have provided a rare opportunity to gather more knowledge about Grimsby's past and to place it in the context of other recent archaeological work undertaken in Grimsby.

The three seasons of excavations undertaken between 1986 and 1989 have shed considerable light on the development and history of properties adjacent to the Haven, which would have formed the heart of the town in the medieval period. A sequence of road surfaces and associated buildings and deposits indicating the changing position of Haven Street and its relation to the waterfront since the 12th century has been uncovered. Additional information has also been gathered about the layout of the Augustinian Friary which occupied the plot to the east of Alexandra Road.



Plate 1. General view of the 1989 Haven Street trench from the east.



## Background

The earliest references to Grimsby occur in material of Viking origin. Though the exact location of this early settlement is unknown, it is likely to have been south of the existing centre of the town, which would have been too wet and marshy an area for settlement in this period. River Head originally continued southwards beyond the site of Wellow Abbey where the higher, drier land would have provided an ideal spot for a port and haven. As the river silted up and the marshy areas to the north were reclaimed, the centre of settlement probably shifted northwards. The earliest known map of Grimsby, dated circa 1600 (Fig. 1) shows the port to be concentrated around the Freshney Haven and River Head, though the area immediately south of River Head was known at this time as the Old Haven, indicating a shift in the concentration of activity. This movement has continued in modern times; firstly with the formation of the Grimsby Haven Company (later to become the Grimsby Dock Company) in the 18th century, which expanded the docks north of the Freshney Haven and then in more recent times with further expansion towards the Humber itself.

As can be seen from the map, River Head and the Freshney Haven formed the eastern and northern boundaries of the medieval town. The Freshney Haven is in fact an artificial feature, constructed in the 14th century to expand the port facilities. The Freshney River originally entered the Humber to the north west.

Documentary research has produced a little information on this part of the town, but insufficient to present a clear picture and certainly not enough to understand its development throughout the medieval period. It is clear that buildings adjacent or close to River Head would have been associated with river trade, though their individual functions and plot sizes, important aspects for understanding the general layout of the town, are uncertain. Similarly, though there is an area defined as the Augustinian Friary precinct, there is no direct evidence for establishing the layout of buildings, their size, or location within the precinct. There is also the probability that occupation existed here before the foundation of the friary as it is sited within the town boundary, the usual position being adjacent to it and on the outside.

The extension to the River Head shopping centre will occupy an area at the northern extremity of the medieval town, where activity related to waterborne trade would have been concentrated and where a sequence of occupation might be expected, extending from before the arrival of the friars, right up to the present day.

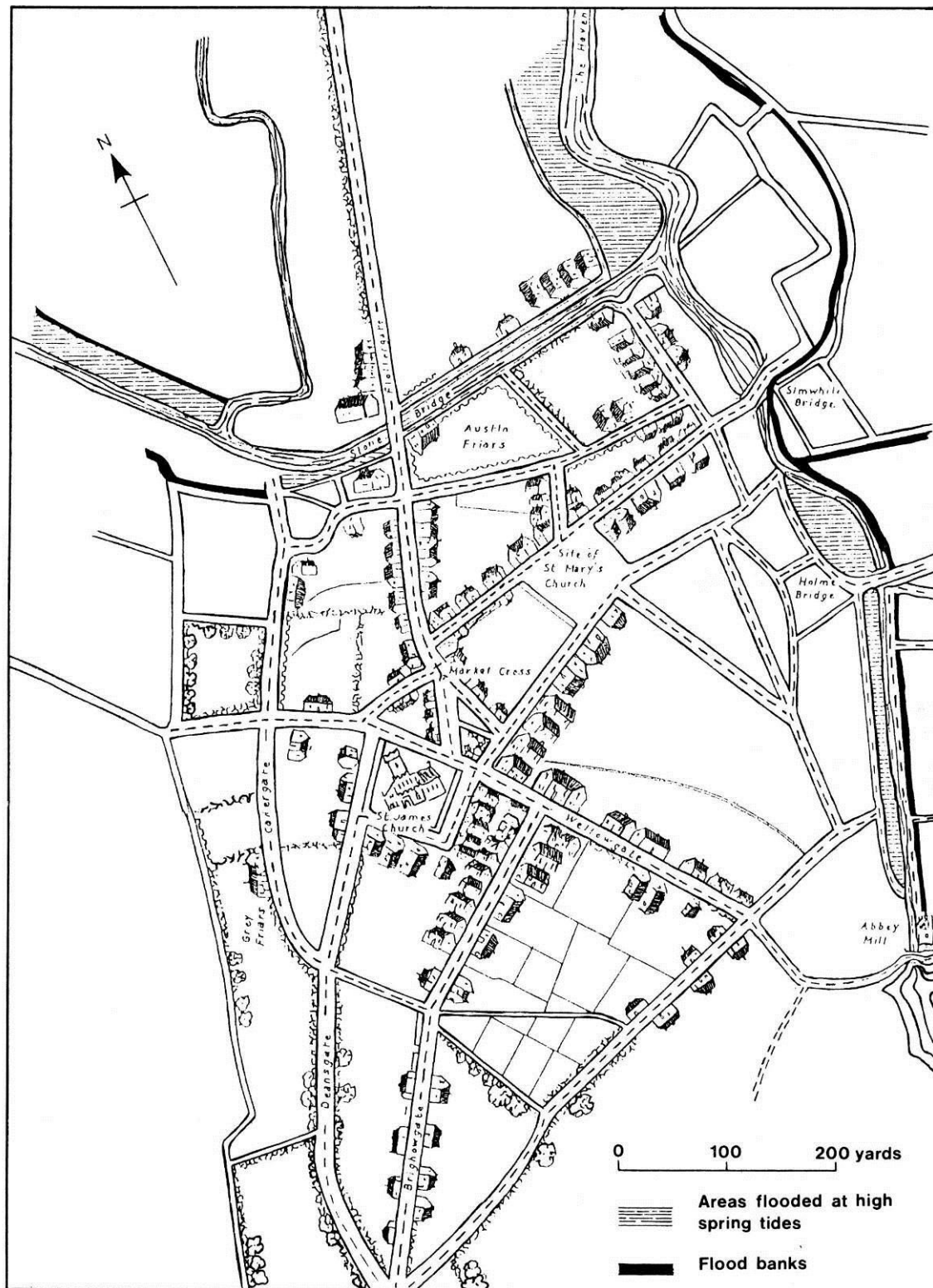


Figure 1. The earliest known map of Grimsby, dated circa 1600.

## The Excavations

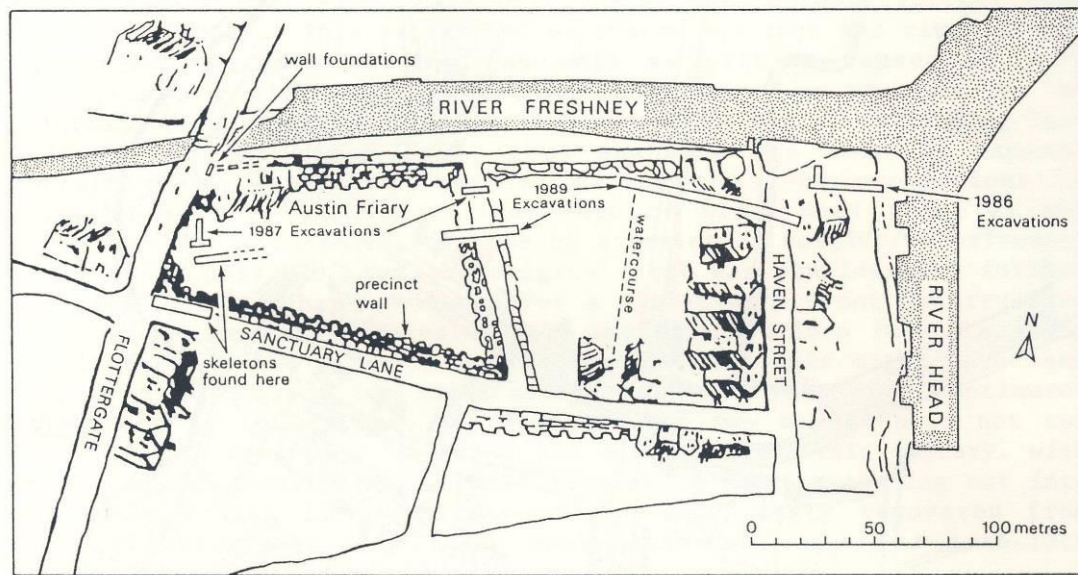


Figure 2. Plan showing location of excavations.

### 1986 Excavations

Trial excavations in 1986, prior to the construction of New Baxtergate, revealed a medieval timber waterfront (Plate 2) some 15m west of the existing water's edge and a rough track of tile and cobble, set on a ridge of clay, leading towards the corner formed by the junction of the Freshney Haven and River Head. Pottery and other finds from layers associated with the waterfront and track suggest that they dated from the 13th-14th centuries, with the possibility that earlier waterfronts and surfaces lay below them. These may subsequently have been in part disturbed by the insertion of later waterfronts, particularly by that constructed in the 18th century.



Plate 2. Medieval waterfront timbers, 1986 excavations.



## 1987 Excavations



Plate 3. General view of the 1987 excavations from the south-east.

Trial trench work in 1987 established that deposits and features dating at least as far back as the 12th-13th centuries survived with minimal disturbance in the area known to have been occupied by the Augustinian Friary. The order of Augustinian Friars (popularly known as Austin Friars) was founded in 1256 and was one of several mendicant orders established in the thirteenth century as a reaction to the increasing isolation of the monastic orders, to bring religion to the population, particularly in the towns. Documentary evidence indicates that the friary in Grimsby was founded in 1293 and that the buildings and lands were taken over by the crown at the Dissolution, in 1539.

A trench excavated to establish the location of the eastern boundary to the precinct was not altogether conclusive, as no evidence for a precinct wall could be found. However, a concentration of cobbles did seem to confirm the alignment of the lane forming this boundary (Figs 2 and 3).

## 1989 Excavations

In March 1989, further excavations began, to supplement those of 1986 and 1987. The impending construction works limited the areas available to a single machine-excavated trench (to further examine the eastern boundary to the Augustinian Friary) and a long, hand-excavated trench, across and to the west of Haven Street, to examine properties associated with the port area.

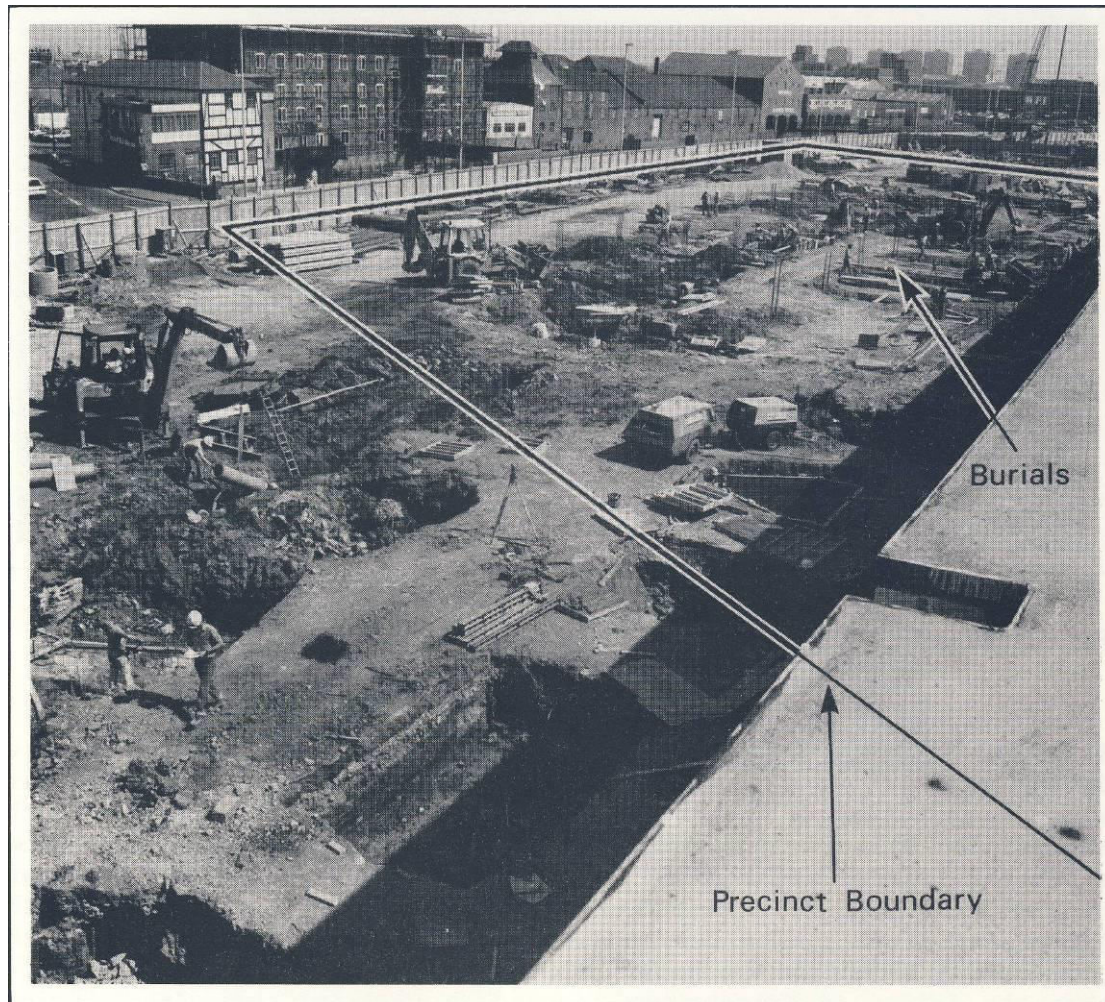


Plate 4. Development of the Friary area looking north-east.



## Augustinian Friary

A machine-cut trench was excavated on the presumed alignment of the lane forming the eastern boundary to the Augustinian Friary, in order to confirm and supplement information obtained in 1987. The trench excavated in 1987 had yielded some evidence for the lane, but none for a precinct wall. This year, though limited to machine work, it was possible to excavate to greater depth, not only to attempt to confirm the position of the lane, but also to look for evidence of occupation pre-dating the arrival of the friars.

The location of the eastern precinct boundary is of importance as it is the only one not to survive the medieval period, unlike those to the north, south and west, the Freshney Haven, Sanctuary Lane and Flottergate respectively. As the extent of the land owned by the friars is documented in part, the pinpointing of this boundary would be valuable in appreciating the growth and eventual size of the precinct, as well as its layout, all of which have a bearing on an understanding of the development of the town itself.

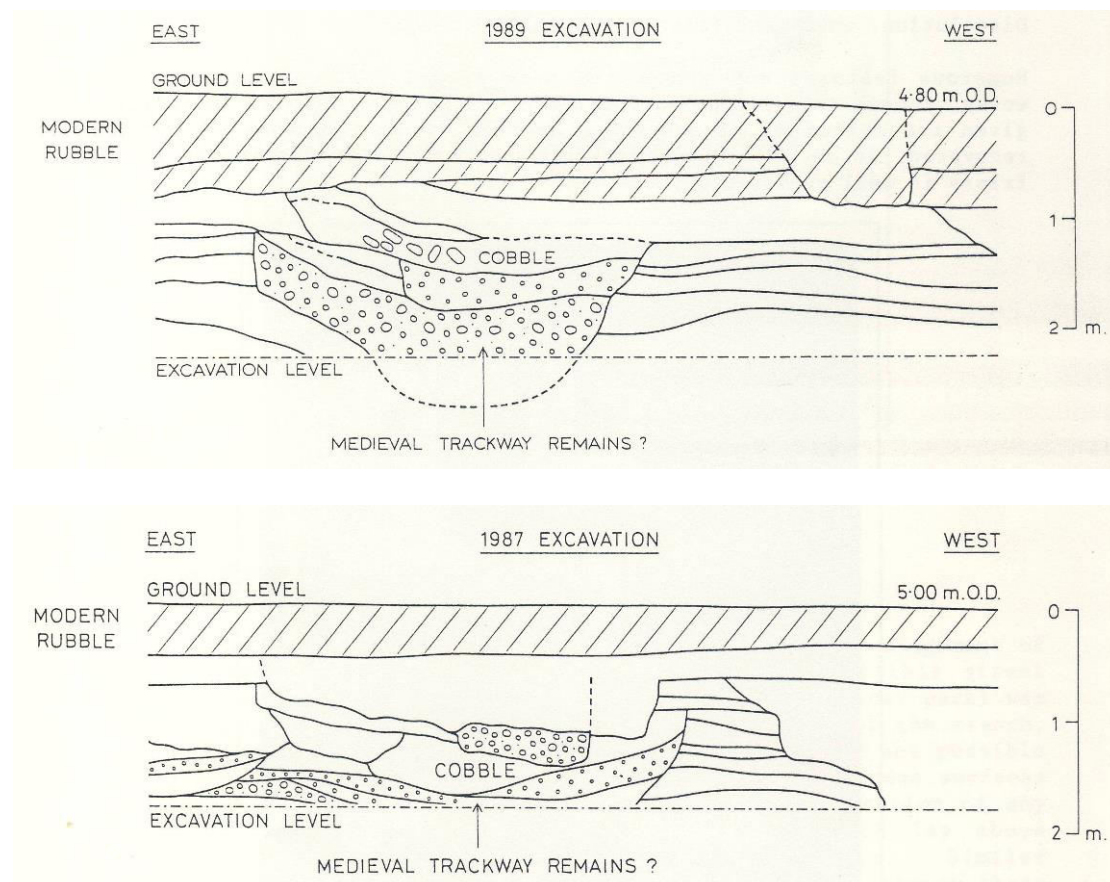


Figure 3. Sections through the lane forming the eastern boundary to the Augustinian Friary.

Further cobbling did come to light during the excavations, apparently confirming the alignment of the lane (Figs 2 and 3), but again there was no evidence for a precinct wall. Though the method of excavation which had to be used was not ideal, the faces of the trench did seem to indicate some occupation either side of the lane, though no structures could be discerned. Pottery recovered suggests a 12th-13th century date, confirming occupation before the foundation of the friary.

Observations on construction works to the west, within the friary precinct, provided a few further clues as to the location of the friary buildings. A number of burials were uncovered, predominantly in the vicinity of previously recorded skeletons (Fig. 2 and Plate 4). Though no major stone foundations were evident that could positively be interpreted as those of the friary church, the concentration of burials here strongly suggests that this was the location of the graveyard, which would probably have been adjacent to the church. Several items of masonry were recovered which probably originated from the fabric of this church, though in most cases these had obviously been re-used in later structures (Plate 5). Building materials from the friary probably became available at the time of the Dissolution, when many friaries were demolished.

Numerous features and structures were revealed by the construction works, though interpretation and dating of these is almost impossible, given the method of excavation. However, from fragments of pottery recovered, it is clear that material pre-dating the foundation of the friary is well represented here.



Plate 5. A well in the Friary area constructed from masonry probably originating from the Friary Church.



## River Head and- Haven Street



Plate 6. Detailed recording, 1989 excavations.

## Haven Street

A succession of cobble surfaces representing the medieval alignment of Haven Street and culminating in the tarmac surface of this street (which was still in existence before the creation of the car park) was clearly discerned during excavation at the eastern end of the trench, towards River Head (Fig. 4 and Plate 7). Though it was not possible to confirm it, it is quite likely that the earliest of these surfaces ran adjacent to the water's edge, as there was no indication of any structures on the eastern side of the street, which lay above laminates of clay and silt, probably river deposits. Similar materials overlapped or sealed these early surfaces and, though these would have been brought in intentionally in part, to consolidate and raise the ground level, the silty nature of the material would render it unsuitable as a foundation on which to construct buildings.

The street surface was replaced a number of times, each slightly further west than the one before. A major change then took place in the sequence. Instead of the silty clays being dumped on to the earlier surface, a firm brown clay was introduced to form a level platform. Though the fresh cobble surface laid on this clay was again slightly west of the preceding ones, this general movement westwards was otherwise halted, as now the clay platform was used as a firm base for the construction of a building on the east side of the street, the stone foundations of which survived. Despite the fact that dating for this phase is uncertain, the new layout of the street, with buildings rather than the river on its east side, is just as depicted in the plan of c1600. This must therefore have taken place before this date. Though no definite street is shown adjacent to River Head on the map, access to the river would have been necessary and this probably became established at a later date, eventually becoming West Dock Street.



Plate 7. Cobble surface of medieval Haven Street, 1989 excavations.



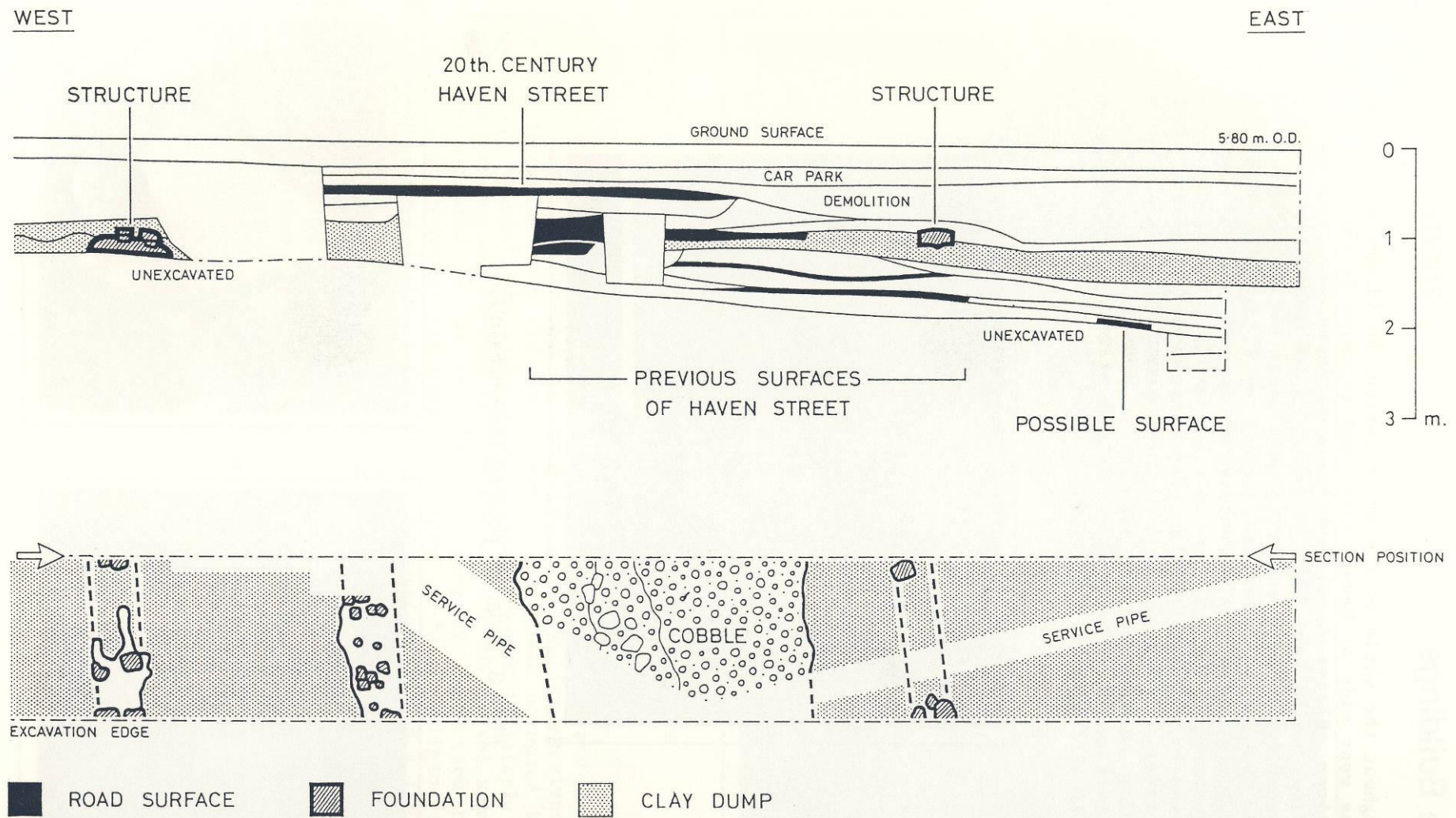


Figure 4. Section and plan of Haven Street showing succession of road surfaces, clay dump and building foundations.

## The Buildings

Throughout the whole of the above period, buildings would have existed on the west side of Haven Street and evidence in the form of padstone positions (Plates 8-10) and floor surfaces was recorded. All the buildings would have been of timber frame construction, each of the timber uprights being supported on a large stone (padstone) set on the ground or small foundation. They were probably small or flimsy buildings as none of the foundations was particularly substantial and the ground conditions were not particularly firm until they were improved by the dump of firm clay brought in to reclaim land east of the street. However, the buildings must have been similar to those standing on the site of the friary and were probably of similar construction to a building excavated at the Blackfriargate site in Hull in 1977 (Fig. 5 and Plate 11).



Plate 8. Padstone position, 1989 excavations.

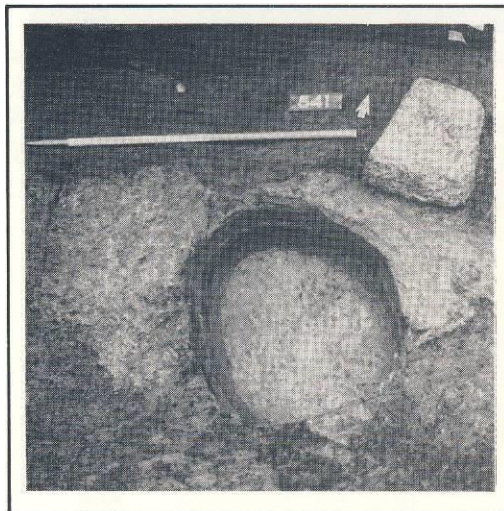


Plate 9. Padstone, 1987 excavations.

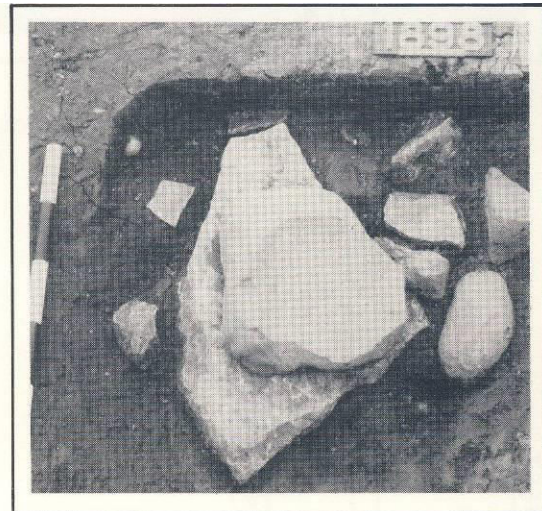


Plate 10. Padstone, 1989 excavations.



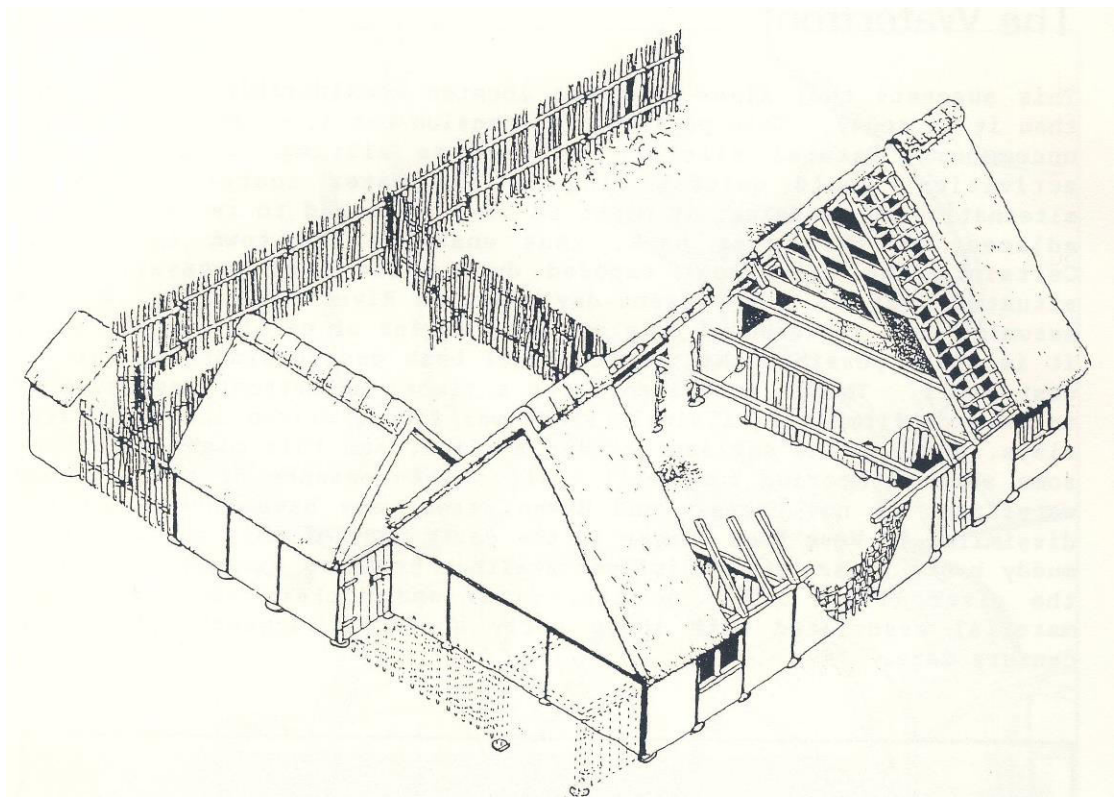


Figure 5. Reconstruction drawing of padstone building on Blackfriargate site in Hull.



Plate 11. Padstone building exposed at Blackfriargate site in Hull, 1977.

## The Waterfront

This suggests that River Head was located considerably further west than it is today. This pattern of expansion out into the river is not uncommon. Natural silting, as well as silting caused by port activities, could quickly clog up the water course and as an alternative to dredging, it might be used as an aid to reclaiming land adjacent to the river bank, thus enabling the town to expand. Certainly the waterfront exposed during the 1986 excavations is situated west of the present-day edge of River Head (Fig. 2) and assuming this represented only one of a series of earlier waterfronts, it is quite possible that the original bank was considerably further west still. Though no evidence for a timber waterfront was revealed to help confirm this, a single stake was found, driven into the silty clays, east of the earliest street surface, and this might have been some sort of mooring for small craft. The presence of a continuous waterfront is not certain and Haven Street may have looked not too dissimilar to West Dock Street in the early part of this century, with muddy banks separating individual staithes or piers extending out into the river (Plate 12). So far, finds and pottery recovered from material associated with these early surfaces suggest a 14th-15th century date.

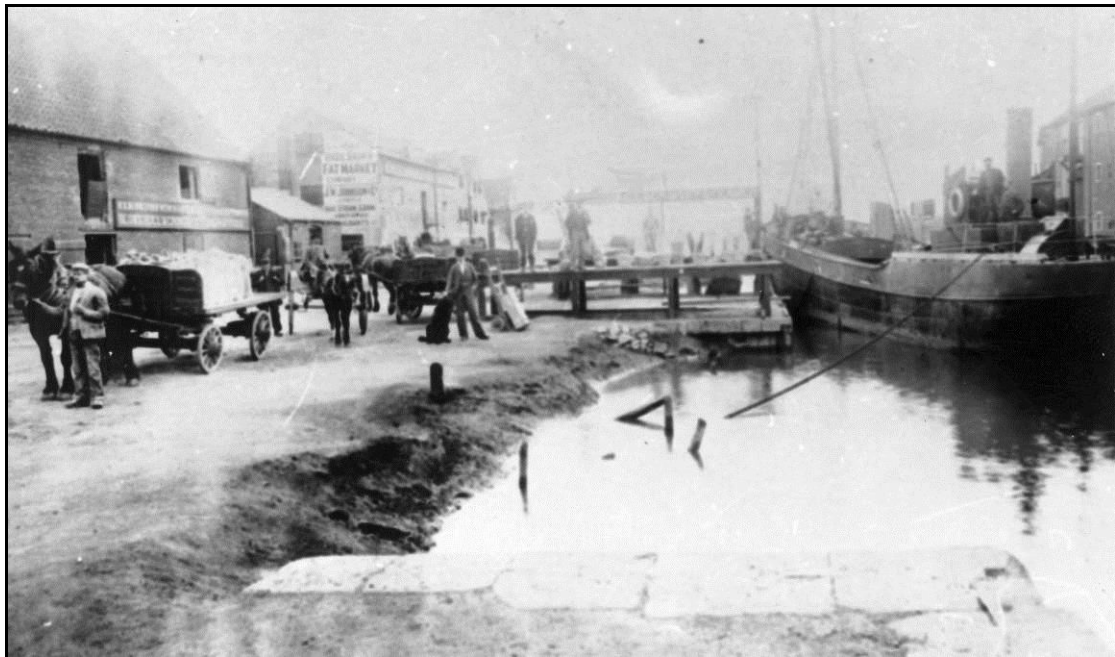


Plate 12. View of River Head, circa 1910.



## The Finds

Pottery will play an important role in dating the occupation of the site and material from the 12th-16th centuries has so far been identified. Of particular note are fragments of face-mask jugs (front and back covers and Plate 13) made in Beverley, Scarborough and West Cowick. These were the height of fashion in mid 13th century tableware and a luxury item. Also recovered was a large quantity of pottery fragments from a small area which were made in Beverley in the 12th century at a kiln site which was discovered in 1987 only a few hundred yards from the Archaeology Unit offices. Many other locally produced and imported wares are represented, which will help to provide a better understanding of local and continental trading patterns associated with the port.

A number of leather objects has been recovered, including shoes, boots, off-cuts, etc., many of these will require careful cleaning and conservation before they can be properly identified.

A very large quantity of metal objects has come from the site. The majority of these are nails of various types and hopefully the particular function of some of these will be determined, which will help in understanding the activities on the site. Other items include buckles, fish hooks, knives, etc. (Plate 14).

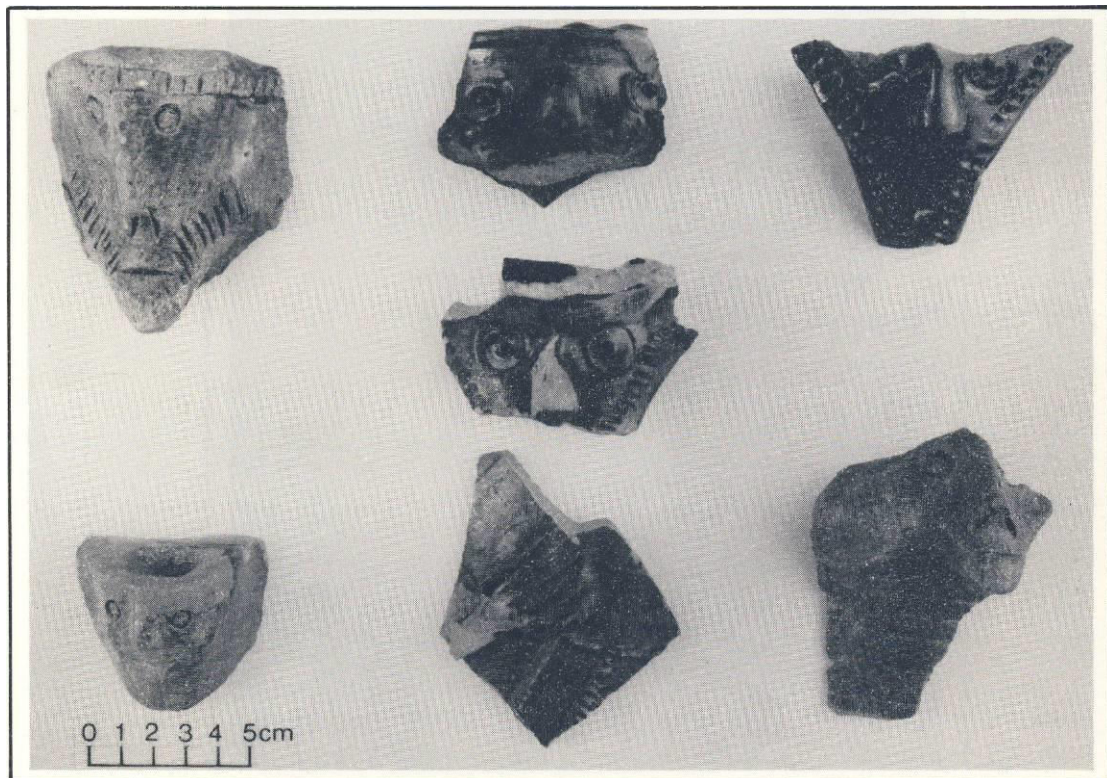
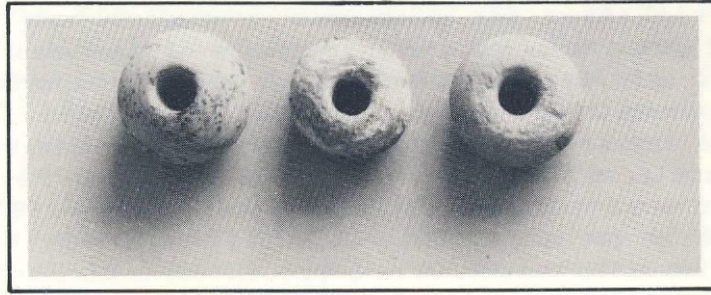


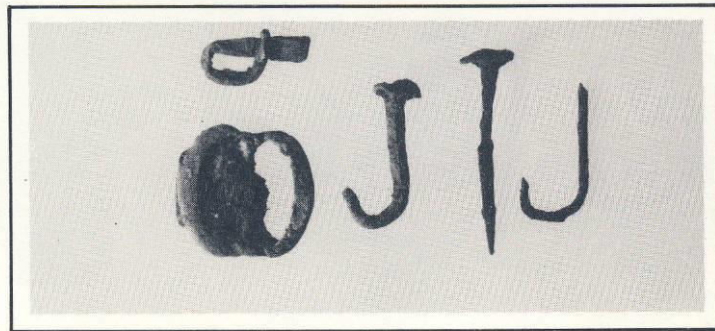
Plate 13. Fragments of face-mask jugs from 1989 excavations.



Spindle whorls from 1987 excavations.



Pottery from 1987 excavations.



A buckle, nails and fish hook from 1989 excavations.

Plate 14. Finds from the excavations. Half actual size.



## Conclusions

Valuable evidence has been recovered on the development of medieval waterfront properties. The finds indicate continuous occupation dating at least as far back as the 12th century. Further analysis of the records and finds is necessary to expand on what, for the moment, must remain only an interim interpretation of the excavations undertaken to date.

The importance of the town in the medieval period as a port and market and its history before this time, the lack of extensive documentation for this period, the lack of previous archaeological work in the town and its importance in relation to the development of the area as a whole, on both sides of the Humber, make further archaeological work in Grimsby a high priority. This is further supported by the high level of survival of archaeological remains demonstrated by excavations on the River Head site and at the Pailthorpe's site on Victoria Street in 1988.

Further analysis of the archives for these sites is essential to add to our slight knowledge of the history of the town and in order to pinpoint future areas for archaeological work.

A full programme of analysis and research is in preparation and, should adequate funding be forthcoming, this will culminate in the production of a comprehensive report on recent archaeological work in Grimsby, to be published sometime in the future. A further popular publication, summarising the results of this analysis may also be produced.

Further Archaeology Unit information on Grimsby:

Excavations at New Baxtergate, Grimsby, 1986. HAU Information Sheet No. 15.

Excavations on the Site of the Augustinian Friary, Grimsby, 1987. HAU Information Sheet No. 21.

Excavations in Grimsby, 1986-1987. HAU Booklet (£1.00)

Pailthorpe's Site, 68-74 Victoria Street, Grimsby. HAU Information Sheet No. 23.

River Head Excavations, Grimsby, 1989. HAU Information Sheet no. 24.

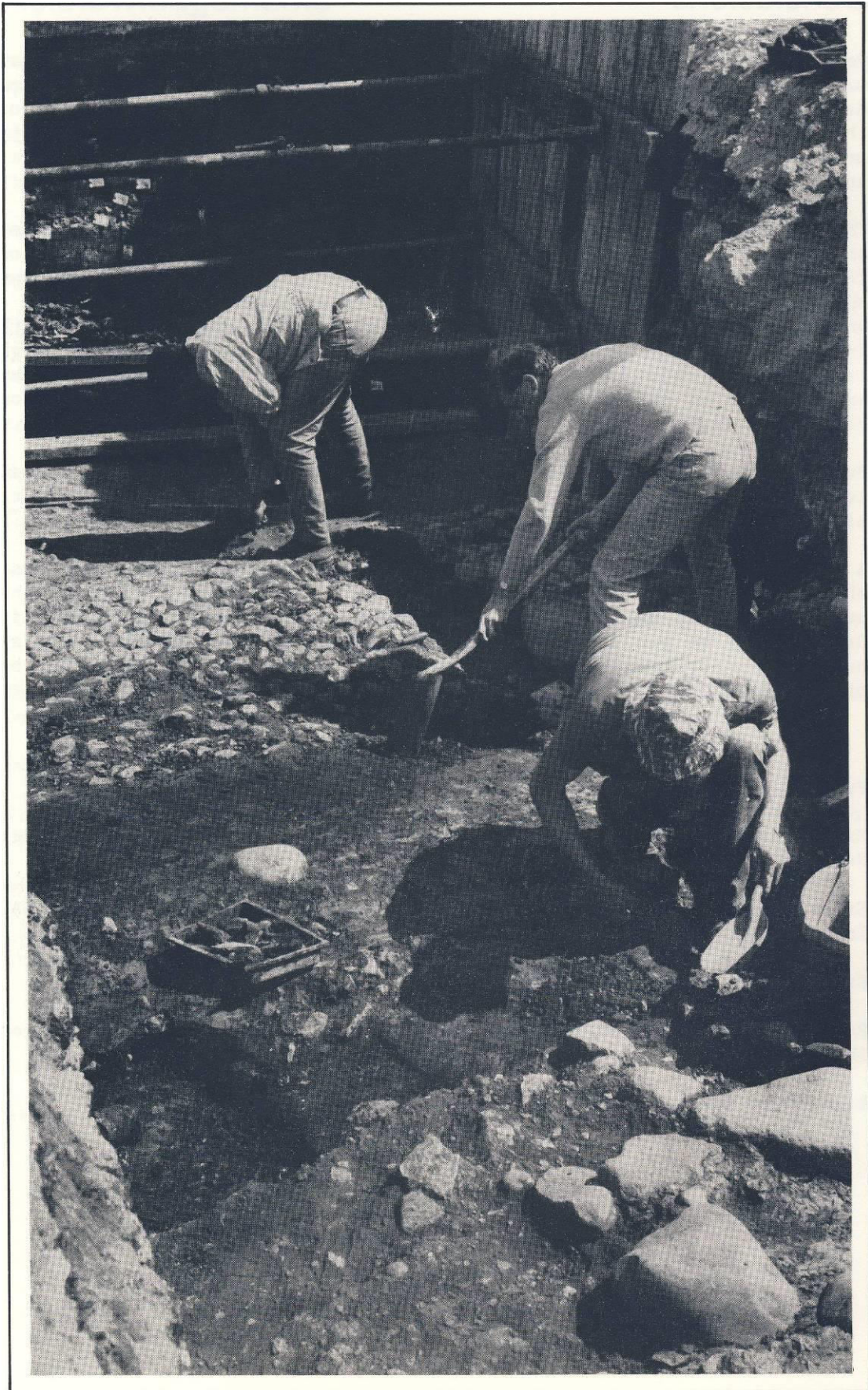
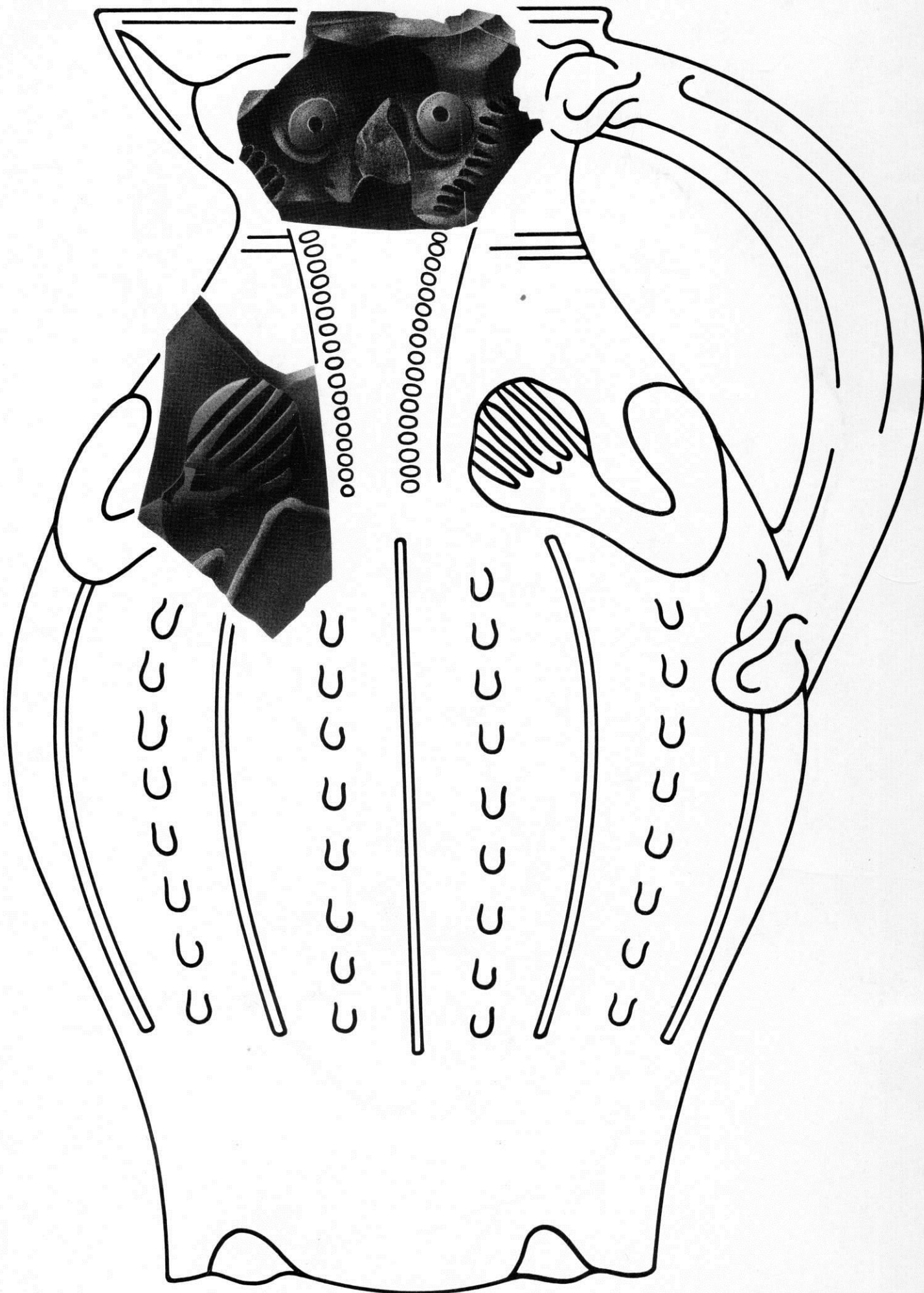


Plate 15. Excavation of medieval Haven Street.





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£1.50