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MEDIEVAL UNDERCROFT, 36 HIGH STREET, ROCHESTER

D. BACCHUS

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 1986, it was learnt from Mr Justin Marsh, proprietor of H.J. Cobbs (Tailor), that a vaulting respond to a medieval undercroft had been unearthed in his cellar, which he wished to be fully investigated and recorded. The respond had been excavated 10 years earlier by Mr D. Williams. (N.G.R. TQ 7425 6868.)

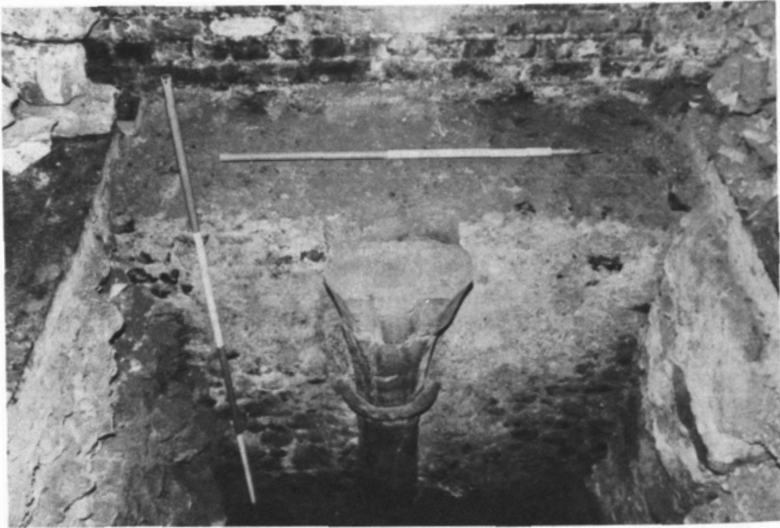
On the 14th February, 1987, a small team led by Mr A.C. Harrison, B.A., F.S.A., and myself started work on the project. The exposed stone respond (Figs. 1 and 5, also Pls. I and II), stands to a height of 1.73 m. and is set into the south-east wall of the undercroft. The respond is of semi-circular form, with carved annular decoration on the capital, the carving being very worn. At a height of 940 mm. (approximately 3 feet), the respond splays to support three ribs, which would have vaulted over from this point. The wall is built of stone, flint and fragments of Roman bonding-tile set in mortar. The ground at the base of the respond is of compacted sandy grit with small pebbles. Retrieved from the spoil of cutting 1, which had to be cleared before excavations commenced, were sections of vaulting ribs and chalk ashlar, which came from the shell of the vaults. The ribs have been carved from Kentish ragstone.¹

Early in the eighteenth century the undercroft was partitioned by a poorly built stone wall. Evidence of this can be seen in the south-west elevation of cutting 1 (Fig. 2). The inserted wall, which is at right angles to the south-east medieval wall, has been dated by its

¹ Stone identification. A sample of stone was examined by Robin Sanderson, of the Geological Museum, who confirmed it to be of Kentish ragstone.



Capital of respond, Cutting 1.



Respond, Cutting 1.

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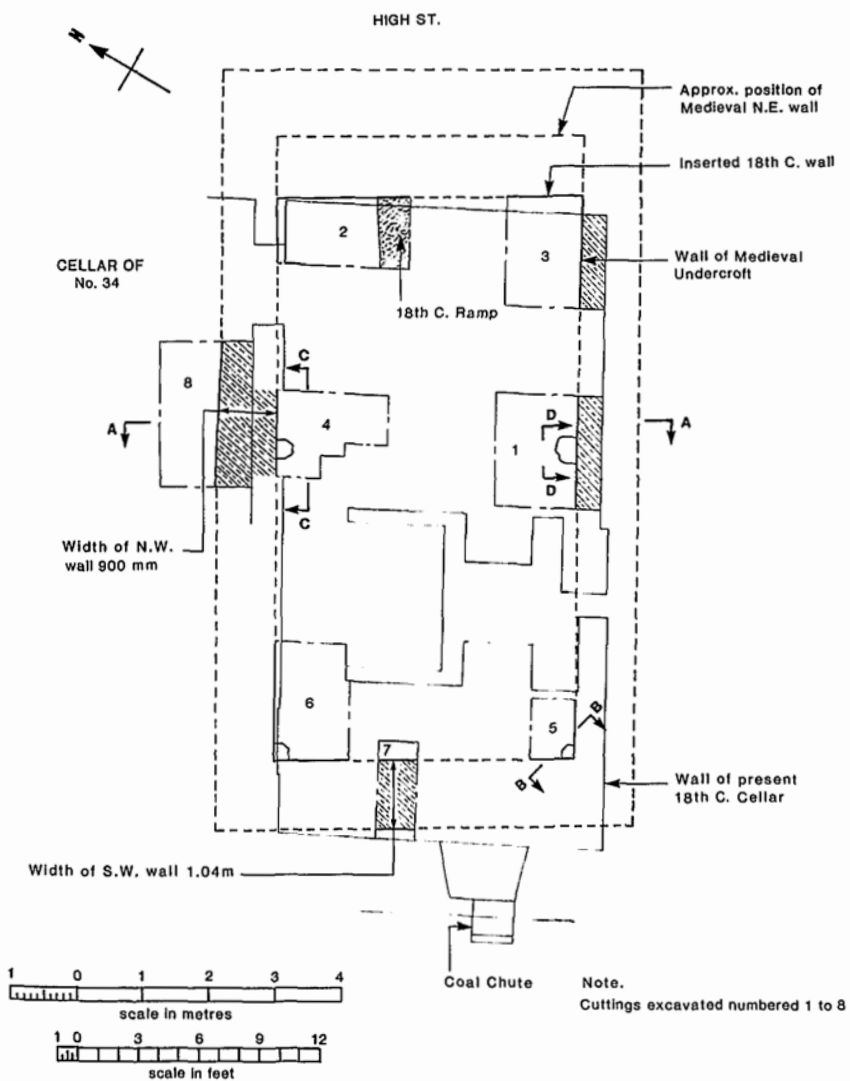


Fig. 1. Plan of undercroft.

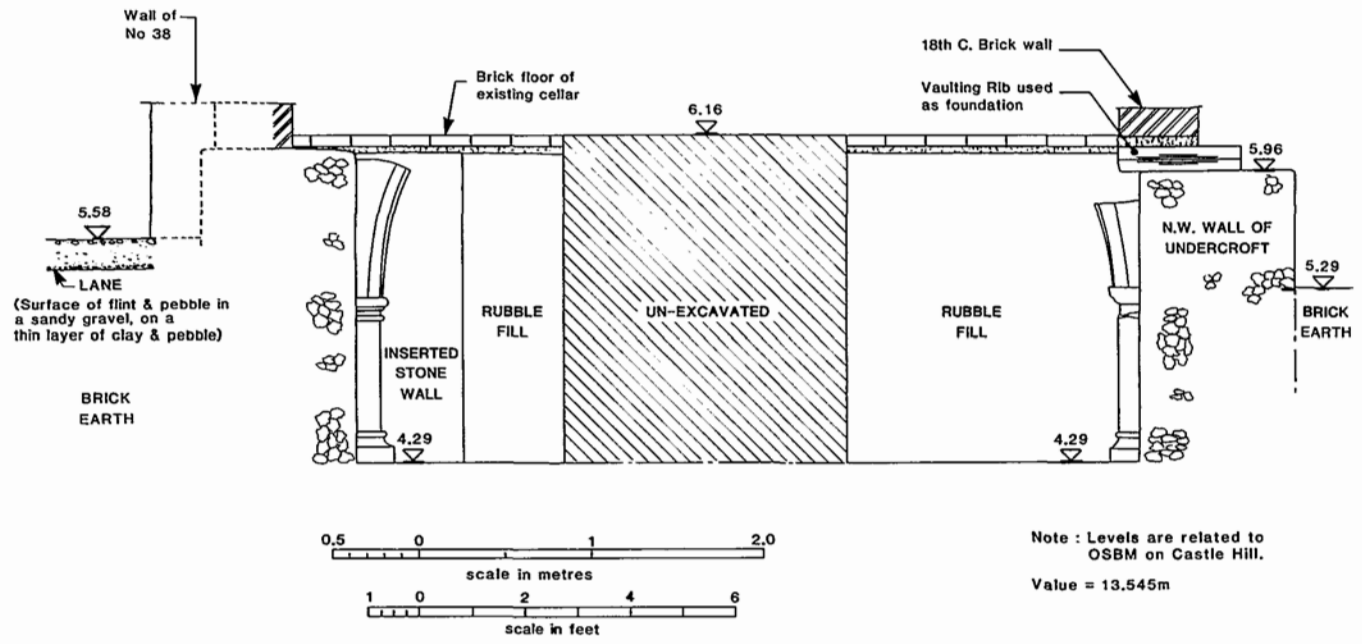


Fig. 2. Section A-A.

similarity to other building structures unearthed in the subsequent excavations.

Over the undercroft is the present eighteenth-century red brick building, the style suiting the date of 1767 cast on a rainwater pipe at the rear of the building.

EXCAVATIONS

To establish the positions of the other responds, five cuttings were initially planned, the planning taking into account considerations of spoil removal and building safety.

Cuttings 2 and 3 were dug at the north-east end of the cellar, exposing stone walls but no corner vaulting responds. On closer inspection of the north-east wall, it was observed that the wall was built of ragstone and is of workmanship inferior to the south-east and north-west walls. Further, there are vertical joints between the north-east wall and the two walls against which it is abutted, indicating that it had been inserted. At the easternmost end of cutting 2 part of a ramp was unearthed; this slopes down from the High Street into the undercroft. The ramp, which is centrally positioned in the High Street wall, is poorly built of stone with some eighteenth-century red brick. The cuttings also revealed that the present building does not sit square upon the medieval walls, the alignment being slightly offset.

After recording and back filling cuttings 2 and 3, cutting 4 was commenced and soon the second respond was uncovered (Fig. 4), this matching in style and construction the opposite respond in cutting 1; unfortunately, the capital is badly damaged. It was also shown that the north-west cellar wall is built on a foundation of vaulting ribs laid across the medieval wall by the eighteenth-century builder (Figs. 2 and 4; also plate IV).

Having located the centrally placed responds, it was hoped that cuttings 5 and 6 would reveal the south-west wall along with the corner responds. Soon after work was started the hope was realised, the respond excavated in cutting 5, being in fair condition (Fig. 3 and Pl. III).

After unearthing the interior faces of three of the original undercroft walls, cuttings 7 and 8 were dug to ascertain the width of the north-west and south-west walls. The exterior face of the south-west wall was exposed and a width of 1.04 m. established. Cutting 8, dug in the cellar of no. 34 High Street, again soon revealed the width of the north-west wall, this being 900 mm. This cutting was continued down until the natural brickearth was reached and a level recorded, the level being 1.00 m. above the undercroft floor. A small trial trench,



Base of respond, Cutting 5.



Vaulting ribs used for the eighteenth-century wall foundation, Cutting 4.

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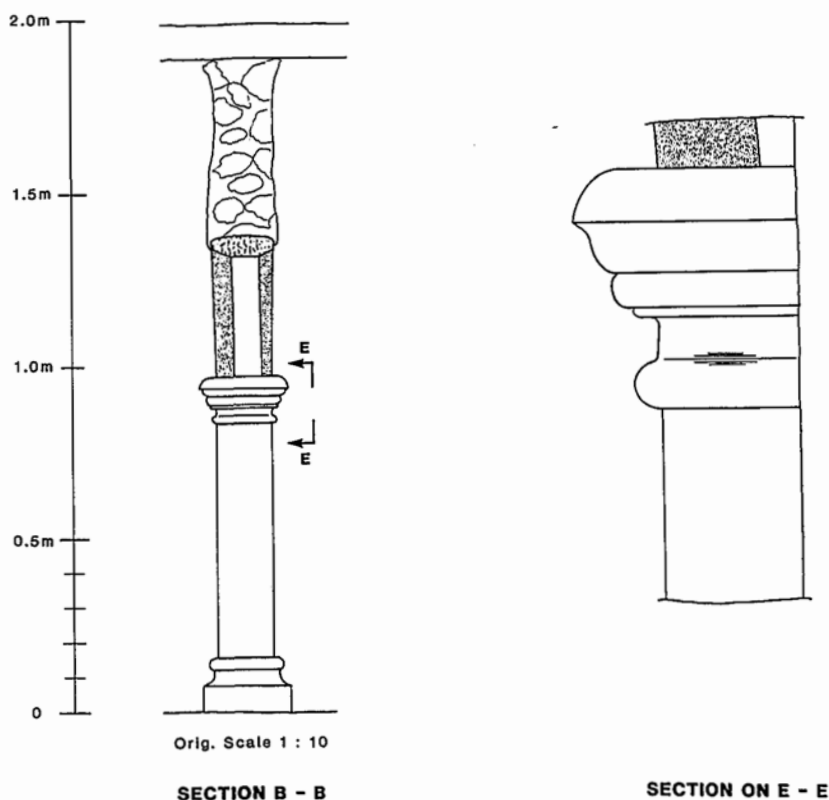


Fig. 3. Corner vaulting respond.

dug against the outer face of this wall, disclosed the foundation to be 970 mm. above the wall foundation on the inner side, indicating the wall base is not square in section, being either stepped or irregular.

The excavation was completed on reaching the natural level in cutting 8.

EXCAVATION ASSESSMENT

The building survey revealed the internal dimensions of this two-bay undercroft to be 8.52 m. \times 4.55 m. The measured distance from the centrally placed respond set in the north-west wall to the internal face of the north-east wall, which fronts the High Street, is 3.77 m. This compares with a length of 4.75 m., measured from the central

respond, back to the south-west wall. Assuming the bays of the undercroft were of similar proportions, this projects the medieval north-east wall approximately 1.00 m. into the present day High Street and would give an internal length of 9.50 m.

As already stated, the High Street wall was inserted some time after the construction of the medieval building. To establish when the alterations took place, we must go back to the excavation of cutting 2. The ramp and wall were of the same poor construction with the ramp containing some eighteenth-century red brick. As the present building was constructed in the 1760s, it is considered that the inserted High Street wall and ramp were built in the early part of the eighteenth century, along with the partition wall revealed in cutting 1. Whether the north-east wall was rebuilt for street widening purposes, or the north-east end of the building was so dilapidated that building work was necessary, is open to question. It would appear, however, that at the time of rebuilding the original dwelling had suffered a considerable loss of status.

Concern for the safety of the building structure limited the amount of excavation undertaken, and so sections of medieval wall, that might have yielded evidence of door and window openings, were not uncovered. An indication of the type of stone surround, of either a doorway or window, was given, by the recovery of a segment of carved stone (Fig. 6). The stone has been shaped to form a simple quadrant matching the style on the vaulting responds.

To examine the make up of the undercroft floor a small trench was dug at the bottom of cutting 4, revealing the ground to be of natural sandy gravel to a depth greater than 800 mm. Having recorded brickearth at a higher level in the cellar of no. 34, the stratum of the ground in this vicinity is of brickearth overlying a sandy gravel. The medieval builders dug through the brickearth to construct the undercroft on the firm natural gravel.

It was also shown from the excavation that the undercroft walls do not meet at right angles. For example, the angle between the north-east and north-west walls is approximately 91 degrees.

AREAS TO THE EAST AND WEST OF THE UNDERCROFT

Excavations in the cellar of no. 34 disclosed natural brickearth alongside the medieval north-west wall, indicating an open space or alley on the bridge side of the building. To the east, excavations in 1972² revealed a cobbled lane, which ran at right angles to the High

² *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxvii (1972), 241.

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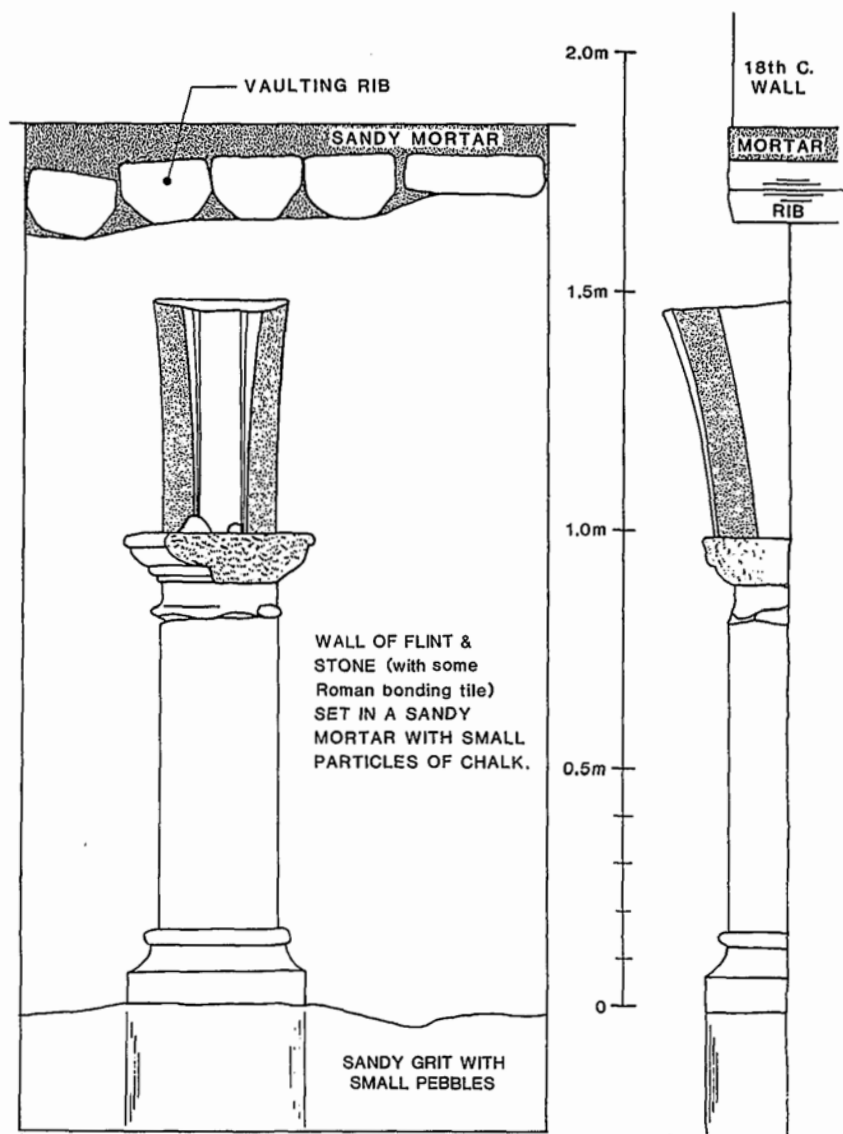


Fig. 4. Vaulting respond, Section C-C.

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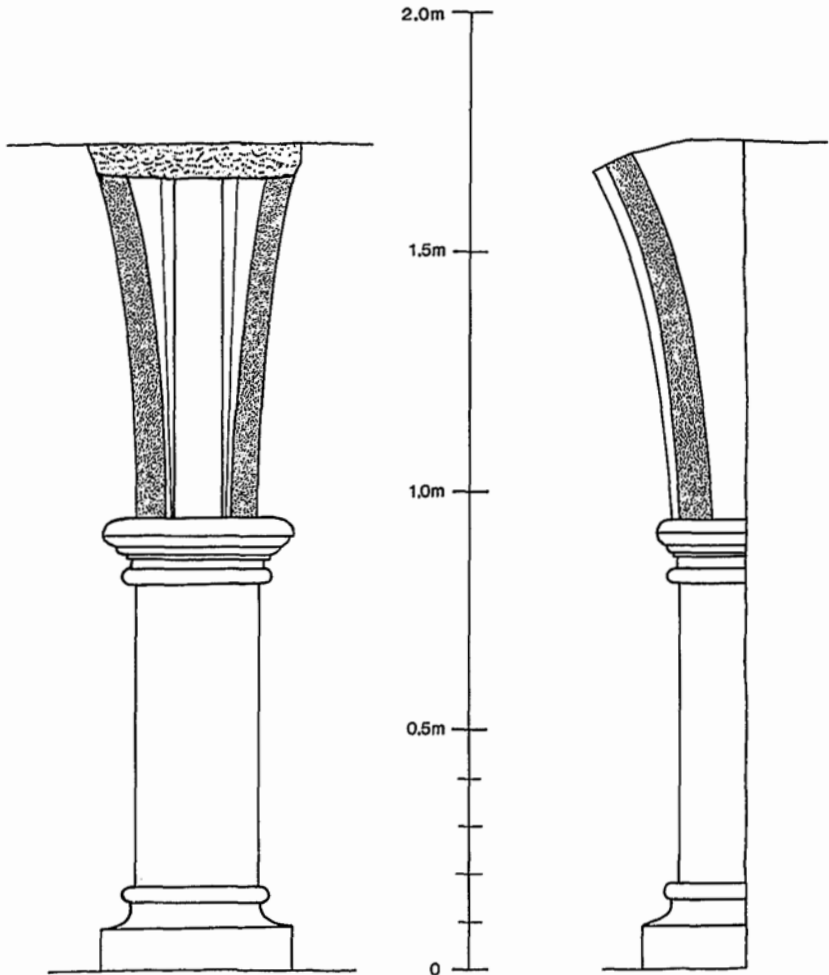
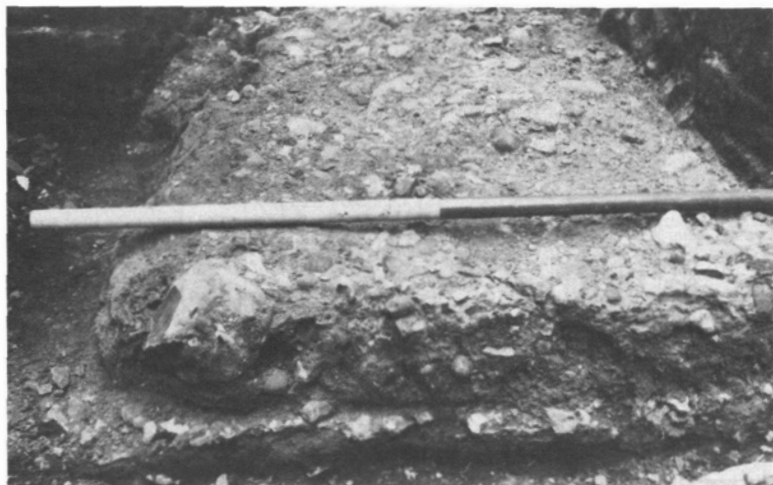


Fig. 5. Vaulting respond, Section D-D.

Street. The medieval builders cut partly into the lane, when they built the undercroft and the metalling that remained was eventually covered by the cellar of no. 38.

Since the 1972 excavation, the area adjacent to the High Street has been cleared, enabling a survey to be undertaken on the east side of the undercroft. The lane has an approximate thickness of 180 mm., with a remaining width of 2.03 m., and is 1.30 m. above the undercroft floor (Figs. 9 and 10). The base layer of dark brown clay

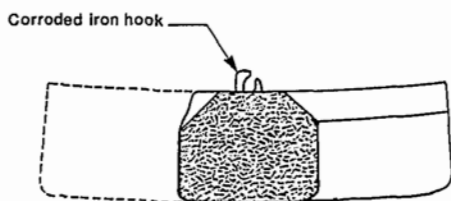
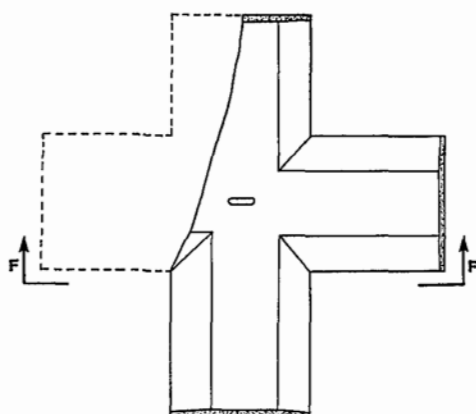
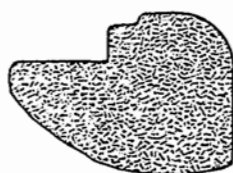
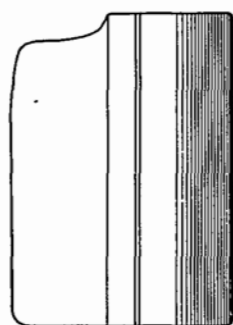


Second-century A.D. gravel lane, Section G-G.

with pebbles has an average thickness of 45 mm., and has been laid upon the natural brickearth. Overlying the clay is a bed of firm pebble gravel containing flints of varying sizes, the gravel has a dark orange colour. Near to the High Street wall the lane thickness increases to 330 mm., possibly indicating the approaching junction of the lane with Watling Street. A cutting taken across the lane revealed the neck of a Roman flagon, that was embedded within the gravel. The flagon dates to approximately A.D. 70–100,³ and is a variant of the Verulamium coarse white-slipped wares.

Due to the close proximity of building foundations, the pit alongside the lane was not completely excavated, work stopping at a depth of 2.0 m. Retrieved from the pit were 20 kg. of animal bones (see Appendix A), plus sherds of Roman and medieval pottery. The only piece to be positively identified is from a Black Burnished 2 ware vessel. It has been dated to late second/early third century. Also recovered were pieces of sliced horn sawn from the antler of red deer, oyster shells and one corroded *antoninianus* of Victorinus (A.D. 268–70).

³ Flagon identification. The Roman flagon neck is a fine variant of the Verulamium coarse white-slipped ware series, type RWS 2539. This type was made in the Brockley Hill kilns, situated between London and St. Albans. The flagon neck can be dated to c. A.D. 70–100 (Information from Linda Green, The Museum of London).



SECTION ON F - F

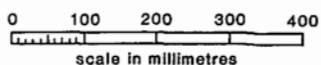


Fig. 6. Segment of carved stone to either doorway or window opening.

Fig. 7. Vaulting intersection of carved stone.

FINDS FROM THE UNDERCROFT

Prior to the construction of the eighteenth-century building, the vaulted roof of the undercroft, was demolished and levelled to establish the present cellar floor. Therefore, the infill of the undercroft consists almost entirely of chalk ashlar with some vaulting ribs.

It was hoped, as there were two quadripartite ribbed vaults to the undercroft, at least one carved ornamental boss would be recovered. Alas, this was not to be, but found amongst the building rubble, was the carved apex intersection of one of the bays (Fig. 7). At the centre of the intersection is an inserted iron hook, around which were found fragments of soft pink plaster. It is doubtful that the hook held an



Fig. 8. Eighteenth-century bottle seal (Scale: 1/1).

ornamental boss, as intersecting ribs with decoration were normally carved as one. Possibly, it held a lantern.

A small amount of pottery was found in the fill of the undercroft, mainly post-1650, with some Tudor and late medieval. At the bottom of the fill was a thick layer of broken eighteenth-century wine bottles, dumped not long before rebuilding. One of the glass fragments, bears a complete bottle seal of Richard Wright, and is dated 1733 (Fig. 8). From the Freeman's Roll,⁴ Mr M. Moad (Curator of Rochester Museum), was unable to find a reference to Richard Wright, but there is a William Wright for this period, who may be related.

Two other items from the fill were a crude Elizabethan token and an eighteenth-century wig curler. The token has a diameter of 15 mm. and is made of lead with a simple cross on one face. The wig curler is marked at both ends with a small crown above the initials I.B.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER LOCAL MEDIEVAL UNDERCROFTS

Opposite H.J. Cobbs is the 'George Vaults Inn' (previously the 'George Inn'). Below the inn, is a fine four-bay undercroft, the lower storey of an early fourteenth-century house.⁵ The vaulting ribs of this structure are supported on chamfered corbels with various forms of leaf decoration on their bases. Ornamental bosses decorate the

⁴ Freeman's Roll, 31st October, 1719. William Wright (Distiller) was admitted to the freedom of the city as an apprentice by the space of seven years, then took the oath of freeman, accordingly.

⁵ *Arch. Cant.*, xxiv (1900), 220-4.

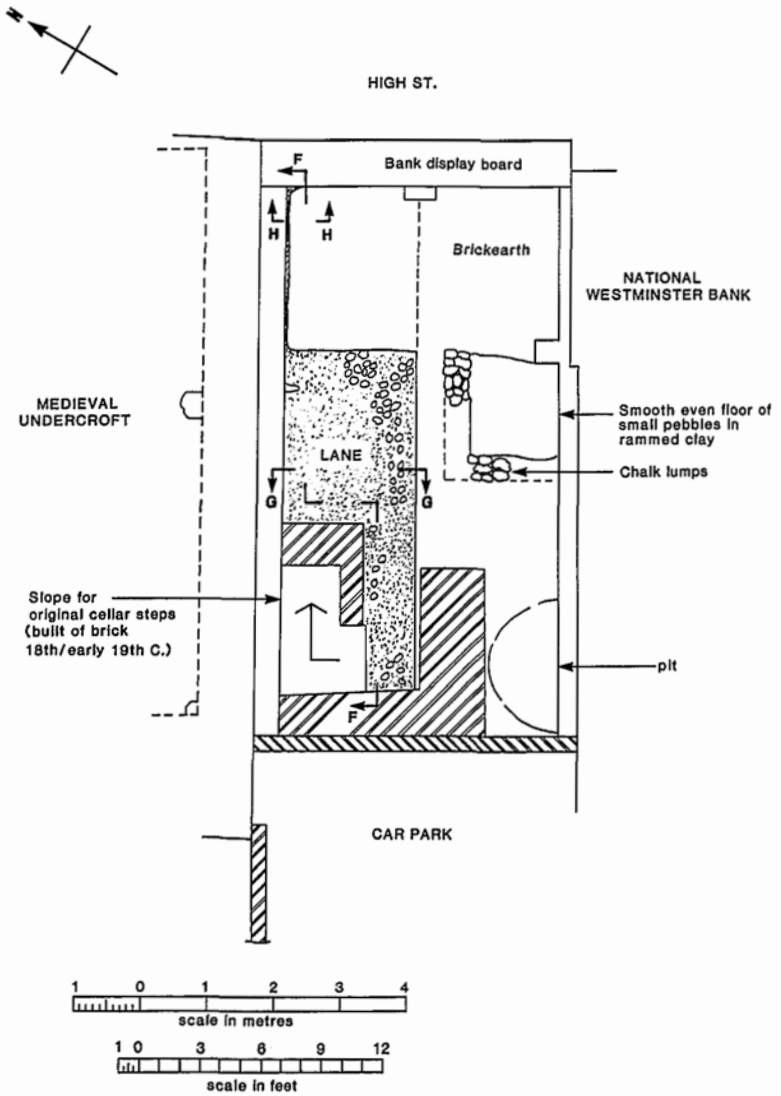
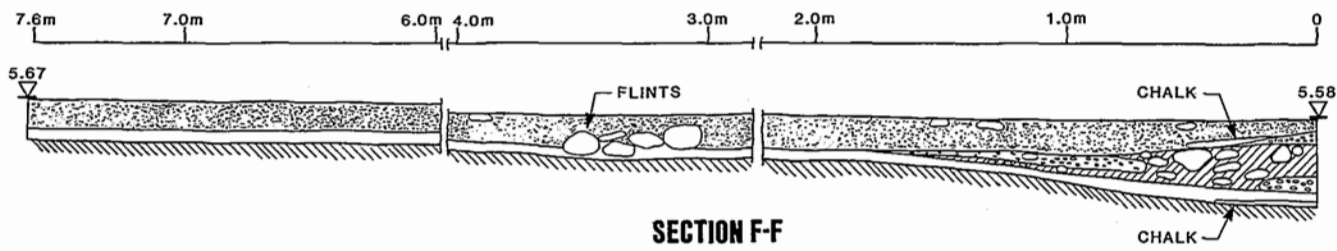
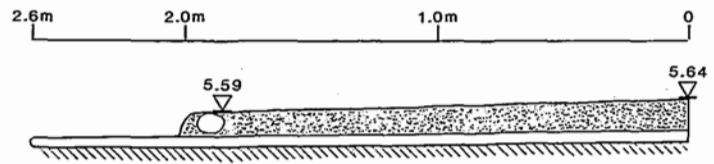


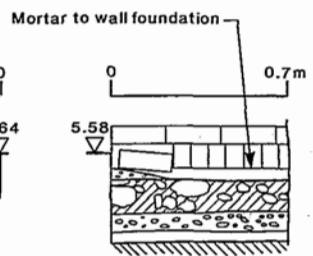
Fig. 9. Plan of no. 38 High Street.








SECTION F-F



SECTION G-G



SECTION H-H

-  Flint & pebble in firm gravel
-  Flints in light brown clay
-  Stone in rammed chalk
-  Dark brown clay with pebble
-  Brickearth

Note : Levels are related to OSBM on Castle Hill
Value=13.545m

Fig. 10. Sections F-F, G-G and H-H.

intersections, nine bosses in total. In contrast, no. 36 High Street has no supporting corbels and the stonework is simpler and rounded in style.

Across the river in Strood is Temple Manor, a thirteenth-century structure of stone, possessing a three-bay undercroft.⁶ The chamfered ribs of this undercroft are similar to those at the 'George Vaults Inn', but there is no longitudinal rib running the length of the building. Also there is very little decoration of the stonework, the capitals of the low responds simply chamfered.

The vaulting ribs of both Temple Manor and the George are formed of short sections of stone, the lengths vary between 140 to 460 mm., whilst the sections from no. 36 High Street, are between 650 to 820 mm. A sketch made in the 1860s, of the Crown Inn undercroft prior to its demolition,⁵ indicates here again, that the vaulting ribs were formed of short sections of stone.

In summary, the undercroft on the Cobbs site, differs in style of form, and to a degree in structure, from the other medieval buildings. The vaults are supported on semi-circular responds, as against a combination of corbels with low responds, and the rib sections are of greater length.

THE AGE OF THE UNDERCROFT⁷

There is an unfortunate lack of well preserved architectural detail to enable the vaulted undercroft to be dated precisely. The capitals of the responds are eroded but one example figured herewith (Fig. 3) seems to represent the general characteristics exhibited by all. The upper component, or abacus, is a developed form of the scroll-moulding common in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries. In this case the under surface bears a slight ogee curve suggesting the later date.

Caution must be observed in attempting to date medieval mouldings closely. Conservatism on the part of the individual masons could result in the survival of early features, particularly in domestic or vernacular structures, lagging behind what was fashionable in churches and other high quality buildings.

The bases of the responds in the Rochester undercroft are of the simple form shown here in illustration, and such would be in keeping

⁶ S.E. Rigold, 'Two Camerae of the military Orders', *Arch. Journ.*, cxxii (1965), 87-103.

⁷ The information contained in this section was supplied by Mr P.J. Tester, F.S.A.

with the secular use of the undercroft where frequent movement of storage materials, such as barrels, would damage ornamental mouldings.

On general evidence, it is suggested that a fourteenth-century date for the undercroft would not be unlikely.

CONCLUSION

This late medieval town house was built gable end on to the High Street, common practice in the commercial areas of medieval towns. It is likely that the undercroft was built approximately one and a quarter metres below ground level, steps leading down from the street. Constructed above, there would probably have been a timber-framed building of two or three storeys. Although on the smaller side, the dwelling would have been owned by a comfortably off merchant or official, using the undercroft for the storage of family provisions and possibly items of trade.

It was noted, that construction of the fourteenth-century undercroft removed all earlier levels of occupation. Whilst the building of the post-medieval cellar at no. 38, did not destroy earlier features such as the flint and gravel lane. Pottery finds associated with the lane, from recent and earlier excavations, suggest a second-century A.D. date for the lane.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Mr Justin Marsh and his son for their interest and co-operativeness, along with Mr A.C. Harrison, for his guidance and directing of the project. Also Mr P.J. Tester for his contribution to this report, Mr M. Moad for the information he supplied from the Freeman's Roll, Albert Daniels for the bone report, and Linda Green for identification of the pottery. Finally, my thanks to the members of the Lower Medway and Maidstone Area Archaeological Groups who carried out the excavations, with much appreciated assistance from Ian Fearn, Michael Freeman, Terry Smith, Tom Tasker, Roger Wallbridge and Lynne Boorer who assisted with the drawings.

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APPENDIX A

Report on bones from a pit at the National Westminster Bank extension, 38 High Street, Rochester.

A quantity of animal bones were recovered from the excavation of a pit. The total quantity of bones amounted to 20 kg., about half could be identified.

List of identifiable bones:

<i>Ovis</i> (sheep)		<i>Sus</i> (pig)	
horn core	1	metatarsus	3
pelvis	1	calcaneus	3
scapula	2	pelvis	3
humerus	5	astragalus	2
tibia	5	scapula	3
radius	5	tibia	1
metatarsus	3	ulna	1
metacarpus	2	atlas	1
epistropheus	1	mandible	2
maxilla	1	maxilla	4
mandible	4		
<i>Bos</i> (cattle)		<i>Equus</i> (horse)	
horn core	1	scapula	1
pelvis	1		
calcaneus	4	<i>Gallus</i> (domestic fowl)	
phalanx prima	3		
metacarpus	1	ulna	1
femur	2		
atlas	1		
vertebra	1		
mandible	1		

The bones represent the remains of parts of at least 3 sheep, 2 cattle, 2 pigs, 1 horse and 1 domestic fowl.