

Bridge Street, East II

Reading

Interim Report



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BRIDGE STREET, EAST 11, READING. INTERIM REPORT.

Further Work

An application for a grant to cover the costs of post-excavation work and publication has been made to English Heritage for the financial year 1987/8. It is intended to integrate the results of this excavation with other work in the Bridge Street / Fobney Street area already carried out. Aspects of the late post-medieval and recent industrial activity and development are outside the scope of the research design for Reading waterfront sites supported by English Heritage, but it is hoped that some outlet for publication of this area of local interest will be found. Post-excavation work will concentrate on the following aspects:

- indexing of site records and preparation of archive
- analysis of excavated finds to refine site chronology and provide information on aspects of technology
- dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) for selected timber samples to confirm suggested dates
- analysis of soil samples for evidence of river and riverside environment
- correlation of documentary and cartographic evidence with excavated features
- preparation of publication accounts

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EXCAVATIONS AT BRIDGE STREET EAST, READING

Summary Report

The present excavation results from the evaluation exercises carried out in April and May 1986. Previously submitted reports dated 2/5/86 and 9/7/86 have outlined the background to the site and its wider relevance to the historical development of Reading.

The evaluation had delimited the zone of archaeological interest to an area in the south-western part of the development site, and proposed the excavation of two further trenches prior to redevelopment. Financial limitations restricted additional excavations to only one trench; the proposed trench 1, nearest to the present main river channel, was considered to offer the greater scope for the interpretation of the use and development of the site, and the proposed trench 2 was not excavated. The excavations were made possible by a further contribution from the developer, London and Edinburgh Trust, a contribution by Reading Borough Council, and an undertaking by English Heritage to support the necessary post-excavation work.

Excavations ran concurrently with river widening works being carried out as part of the development programme, and these required modification of the trench location to enable access of heavy machinery to the riverbank. The co-operation of the contractor, Ealfour Beatty, ensured

the excavations were not impeded and that archaeologically significant aspects of the river widening could be recorded.

After breaking out the surface concrete slabs and machining off the majority of the upper, modern deposits, a wellpoint dewatering ring was installed, enabling excavation to continue to the full depth of archaeological interest. The site was extensively disturbed by brick foundations and disused culverts; only the shallower foundations were removed and excavation was carried out in a series of discrete trenches within the excavation area. The reconstruction of the excavated sequence for the whole site offered below is provisional; detailed confirmation will only be available following analysis of excavated finds and samples and further documentary research.

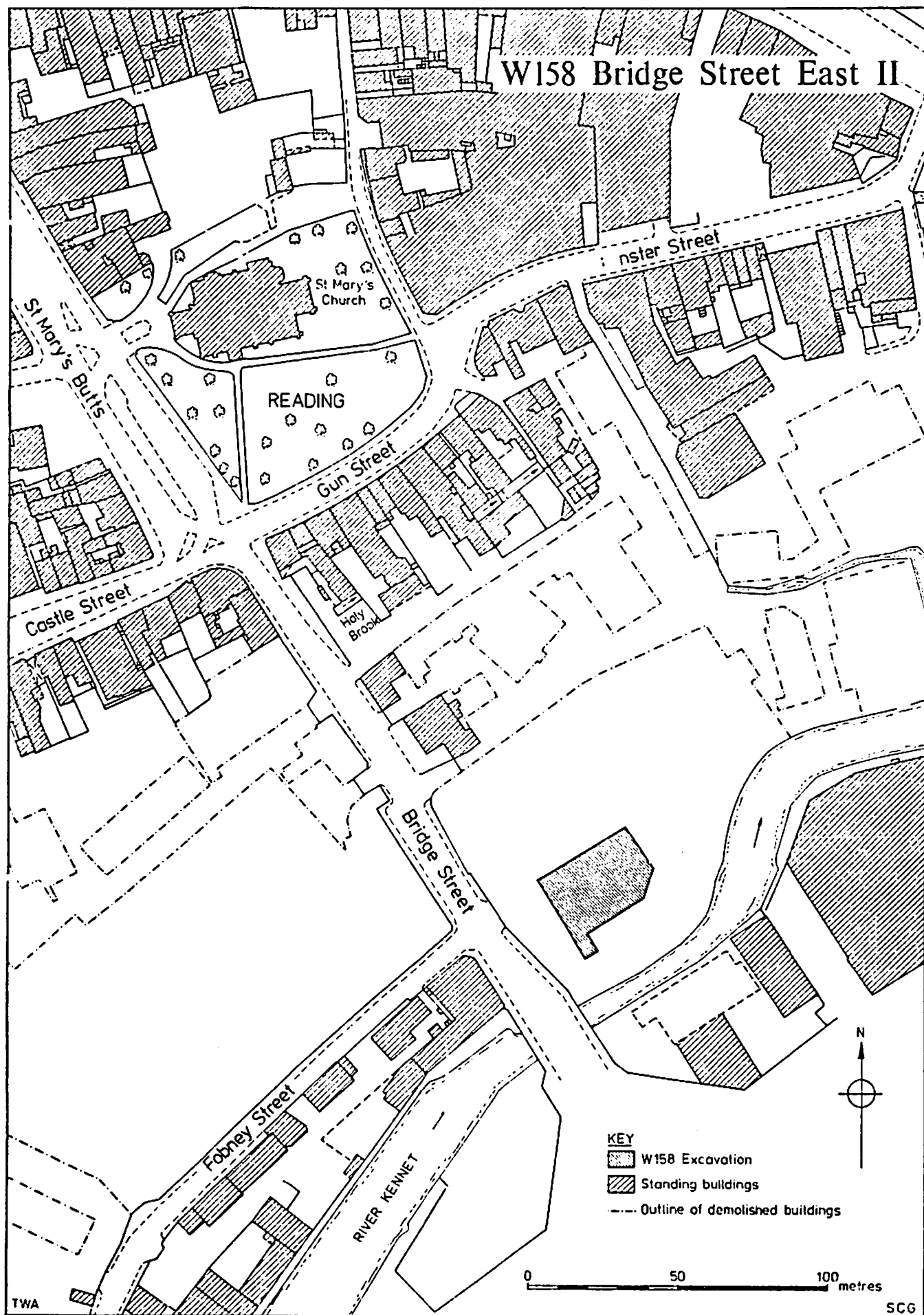


Fig. 1

Pre-Medieval

The earliest deposits examined by the evaluation and full excavations are archaeologically sterile gravels overlain by alluvial silts. Within the full excavation area these silts are associated with 11th century channel management activities, although similar deposits elsewhere on the site are undated and may be earlier: At Crane Wharf (0.5km downstream) alluvial silts overlies late Bronze Age levels, 0.2m of silt accumulating between the late Bronze Age and the mid Saxon period (c1000BC - c700AD), with a further 0.7m between c700AD and c1400AD.

Pre-dating the silts, evidence was recovered for an undated channel in the extreme northern edge of the full excavation where detailed examination was impractical.

Excavations and observations in the Bridge Street / Fobney Street area have demonstrated that river transgressions and the generally boggy ground conditions acted as an effective deterrent to human occupation until the late 17th century, evidence of activity being confined to a narrow corridor either side of Bridge Street and to the revetment of river and stream channels.

Phase I: c1100 - c1220AD (fig. 2)

Within the full excavation area the north bank of a steep sided, irregular river channel was located, cutting into gravel. No southern edge was located despite a machine excavated extension to the trench; the channel must therefore have been in excess of 10m in width and is interpreted as a principal course of the Kennet. No other contemporary braids have been noted elsewhere on the site.

There is no evidence that the channel is of other than natural origin, and dating evidence is confined to the ultimate deposits of silt in the 12th or early 13th century. At this time there are the first indications of human activity: A leat, probably artificial, joins the major channel at an oblique angle. The confluence only is revetted by oak posts and planks, retaining a small clay bank, and it is likely that this is the same channel recovered in the south of evaluation trench B. Minor channels on a similar orientation running from Bridge Street to the main channel are still shown on 17th century maps. Functionally, the leat may have served to drain Bridge Street, or may be associated with channel management for the construction and operation of mills; Minster Mill, two corn mills and a fulling mill in the immediate area are first recorded during the reign of Henry III (1216 - 1272).

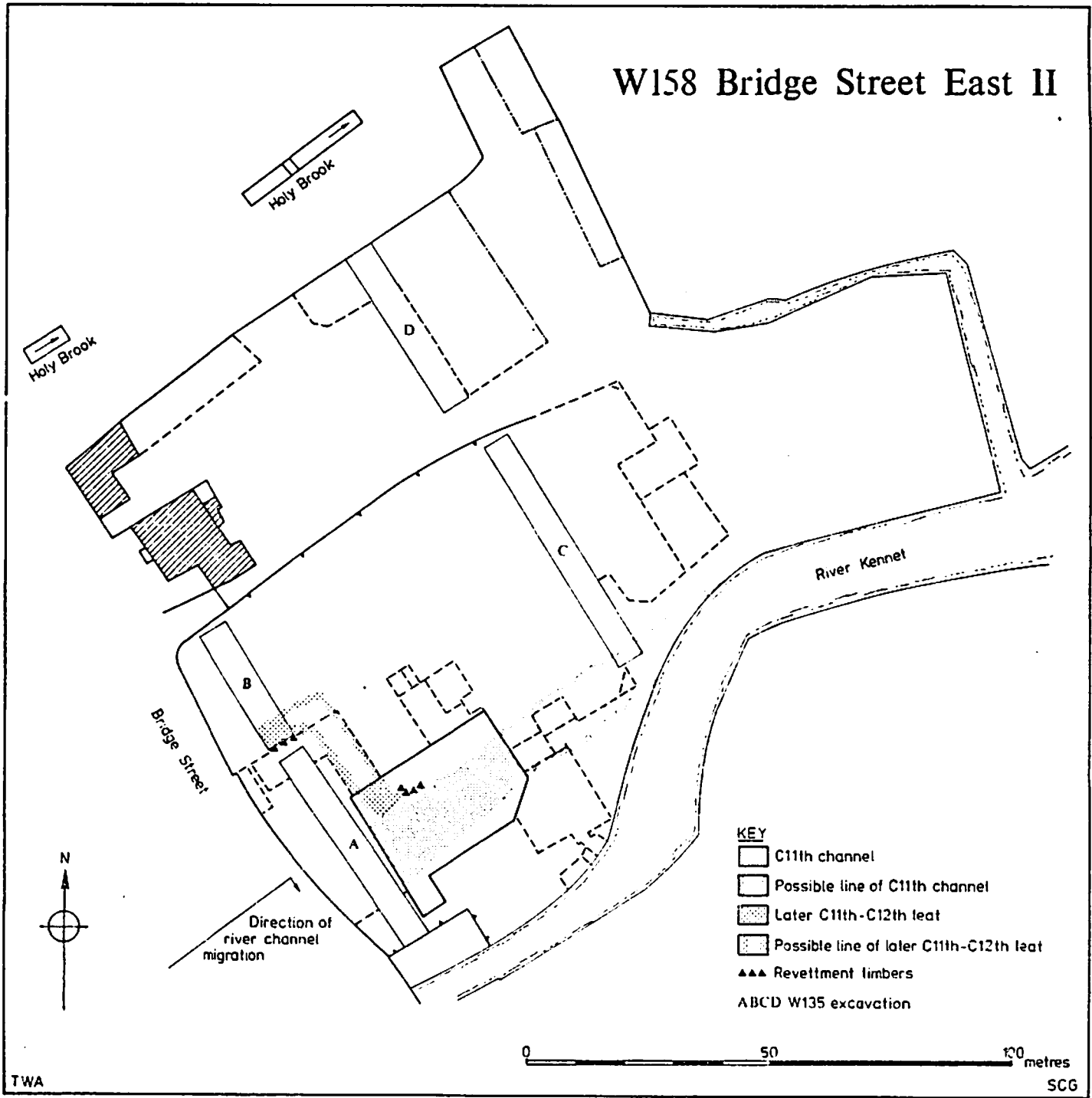


Fig. 2

Phase II: c1220 - c1350 (fig. 3)

Some 4m to the south of the north bank of the previous channel a row of birch stakes supporting a chalk and gravel bank was recovered. These stakes marked the north bank of a revised main channel now moved to the south. Here at Bridge Street and at the Abbey wharf site birch stake alignments can be dated to the end of the 12th or beginning of the 13th century by their association with artefacts; examples from the Holy Brook at Fobney Street and the Library site await radiocarbon dating. These posts supported no planks and would have stabilised the river bank only to a very limited degree. Channel revetments in Reading at this period are apparently confined to mill races and channel confluences; it is assumed that the leat associated with the earlier phase is still in use at this time, although later disturbance meant that the confluence could not be directly observed. The consistency of the technique and craftsmanship of the birch stake revetments over a wide area of the town is noteworthy, and must indicate a degree of centralised authority.

The need for a revision to the channel layout may have arisen from the rapid increase in silt deposition which occurred when the Phase I channel was joined by the leat. The confluence of slow and fast moving channels encourages backwash silting; at the Abbey wharf site, the confluence of the Holy Brook overflow channel and the main river Kennet caused silting on a scale sufficient to require eight realignments of the river bank within a period of c150 years.

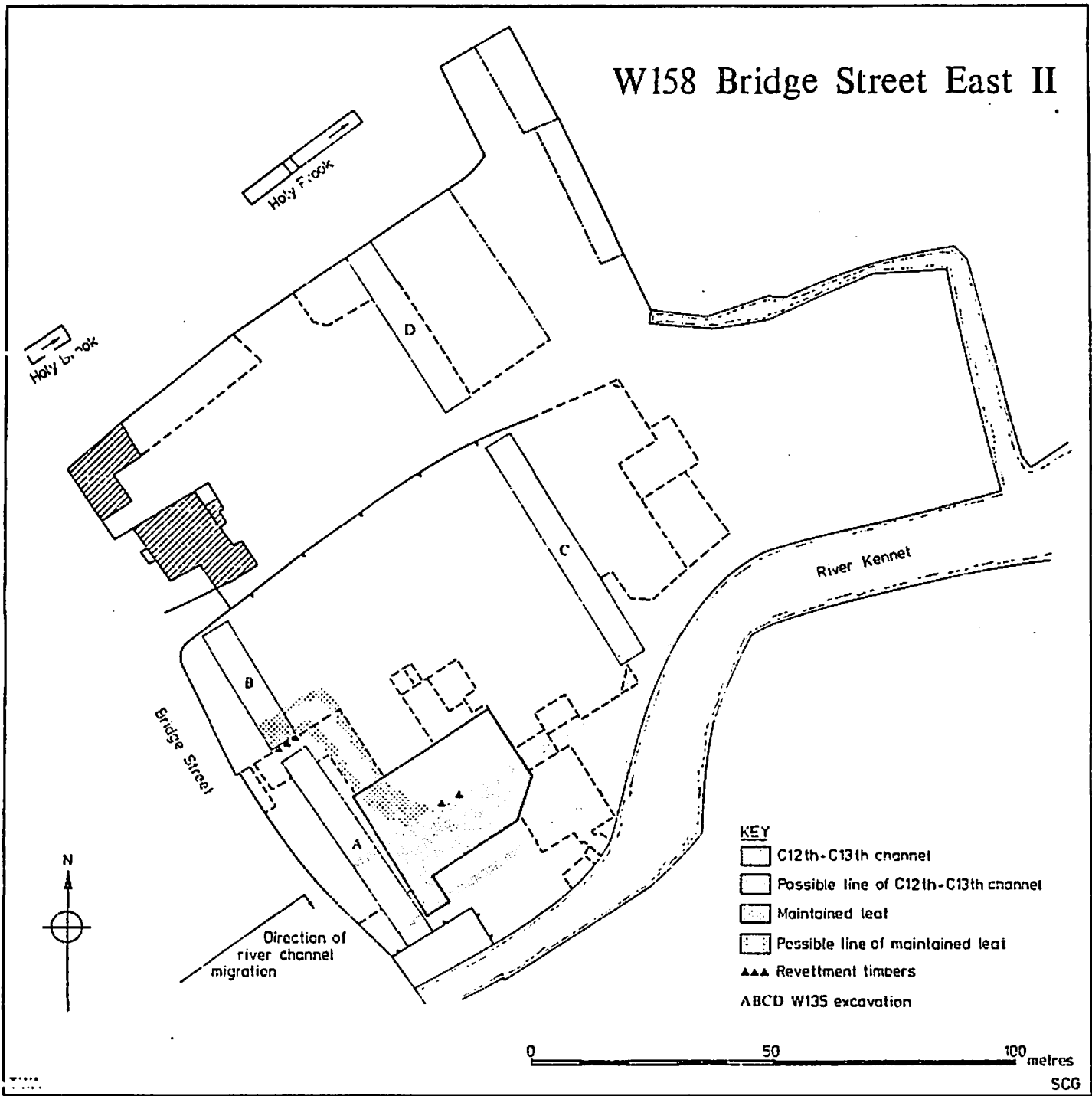


Fig. 3

Phase III: c1350 - c1600

Evidence from other waterfront sites in Reading suggests a tradition of post-and-plank revetment of 14th or 15th century date for which there is no apparent example at Bridge Street. It is possible that such an alignment exists between the trench and the present course of the river, although the current river widening scheme and a machine dug extension to the excavation trench did not reveal any such structure. It is perhaps more likely that the Phase II channel arrangement continued to be serviceable; very few artefacts assignable to this phase indicate no major refurbishment or intensive exploitation of this area in the late medieval / early post-medieval period.

Phase IV: post c1600

a) Channel revetments: Alignments of substantial post-and-plank revetments have been recorded from the river widening works. At least three phases are represented, and analogy with other excavated sites indicates they should span the period c1720 - c1800; further examination of retained samples will clarify this sequence.

Within the excavated area other post-and-plank alignments are apparently associated with 19th century brick-built culverts, although it is by no means certain that all the timbers are integral with the brickwork and it is likely that further analysis will suggest some to have been free-standing structures of 17th century date.

b) Other features: Overlying the medieval river channels and situated on the banks of a watercourse south of the excavated area are a number of clay-lined, brick built tanning pits. Flat-bottomed and rectangular (5m x 3m), the pits had been backfilled with large quantities of horn cores on abandonment, but retained residues of the tanning process. Dating is dependent on the chronology which should eventually be established for the post-medieval timber alignments within the trench, but the pits are not shown on plans of 1787 and almost certainly date to the early part of the 18th or latest 17th century.

The collection of horn cores will provide evidence of animal husbandry techniques for a period hitherto poorly represented in Reading, and the tanning pits themselves will complement other evidence for tanning, preparation and manufacture of leather items in the late medieval and post-medieval periods.

The excavation has also recorded floors and foundations associated with the development of wharfside industries in the 18th and early 19th century; in some cases individual buildings can be correlated with those shown on contemporary maps and plans.



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