

RECORDING THE PAST

THE WEST GATE OF IPSWICH

IN June 1967 the end two houses on the south side of Westgate Street at the corner of Lady Lane - a tobacconist's and a public house - were demolished. Both had been built in 1862, but the public house, "The Feathers", succeeded a 17th century inn of the same name which can be seen abutting the West Gate on its outer side in a watercolour of 1769 in Ipswich Museums collections.

The re-development excavations were watched by the Museum Archaeologist, and when the remains of the south pier of the West Gate came to light, they were measured, plotted and photographed. An attempt was made by the contractors to preserve the coursed masonry for future historians, but for structural reasons it was necessary to demolish to just below the level of the original plinth. Three ashlar blocks were salvaged and have been identified as Caen stone from Normandy. These are now in Ipswich Museums.

The east end of the site had been occupied by the tobacconist's whose 19th century cellar had destroyed the gate to the depth of the 1967 excavation. Under "The Feathers" however, a large chunk of masonry was exposed 10 foot from the edge of the pavement and with a maximum width of 4 foot. In places it was within 9 inches of the present day ground level, and went down at least 14 foot 6 inches (the limit of the exploratory hole generously dug by the contractors). It was built of large flints, with some erratic boulders, but at the west ("Feathers") end the bottom 8 foot was faced with ashlar blocks. At 7 foot 9 inches below the present ground level there was a plinth, 150° from the vertical, four courses wide, with a single course of ashlar above. These stones were so carefully dressed that the

joints were barely visible, and measured about 9 inches high and from 11½ to 14 inches long. The plinth continued on the south for a further 6 foot, but without the ashlar facing.

Specialists who have examined the diagonal axing on the stone below the plinth agree that it is typical of the 12th century. The claw tooling on the stones from the plinth and the course above is of the 13th century. This could be interpreted in two ways: either there were two building phases, or two workshops existed in the 13th century, one using the new technique with the claw tool, and the other the older axe.

An entry of 1204 in the Ipswich Domesday records that ramparts were constructed for the town with financial help from local people and the county of Cambridge. This fits in well with the evidence of the plinth. However, the town must already have been fortified in Saxon times, being a port of some importance and very vulnerable to Danish raids. It was divided into four letes or wards, probably of Saxon origin,

named after each of the four gates. If the West Gate was built in two stages the upper part may perhaps be associated with the grant from the Crown of 1299 of murage (the right of levying a toll for the repair of town walls). One of the stones examined seems to show evidence of later re-working in the techniques of the late 14th century. This could relate to the licence 'to strengthen the town with a stone wall' of 1352.

The first mention of the West Gate as a structure records that shortly after John de Caldwell, Bailiff and Portman, rebuilt the gate and turned it into a gaol at his own expense. It remained a lock-up until November 1781, when it was sold for £30 by order of the Great Court of Ipswich. It was demolished that winter. Only the North Gate and the West Gate are marked on Speede's map of 1610. (Pennington's map of 1778 is not clear in the matter of the West Gate.) The North Gate was pulled down in 1794. The South Gate was probably near Stoke Bridge, or the adjacent ford. The site of the East Gate is even more uncertain, but a mention



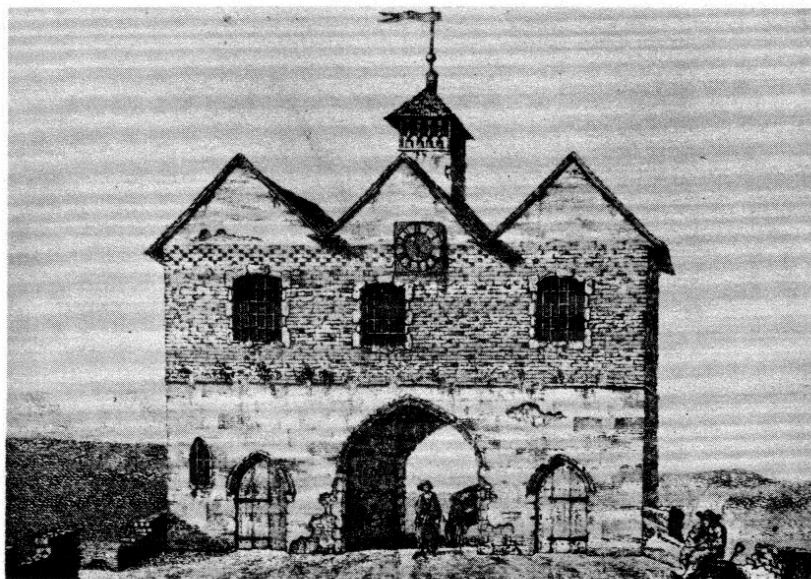
*The west or outer side of the West Gate
Water-colour, inscribed on the reverse: June 24. 1769 (R. 1955-29)
Attributed to Francis Grose (1731? - 1791)*

in Bacon's early 17th century *Annals of Ipswich* of a message in the parish of St. Clement's "abutting "uppon Clem^{ts} Streete East, and "uppon an empty place called "Shirehouse hill and the churchyard "of the antiquated Church called "Osterbolt" seems to fit a site at the junction of what are now Orwell Place and Orwell Street.

To the south of the West Gate the contractors dug a series of 6ft. holes which were not deep enough to reach the Town Ditch. On the east of the site however the tip lines of the gravel rampart were clearly visible. In one section a pit (containing nothing dateable) cut through the lower levels. This was sealed by five successive levels, and probably shows a heightening of the rampart. The holes were too limited to discover whether there had been a stone wall. An earlier archaeological excavation (1959) across the rampart and ditch in Shire Hall Yard showed that no wall had been built, but a foundation trench had been dug. This probably links with the licence to crenellate granted in 1352 and surrendered two years later.

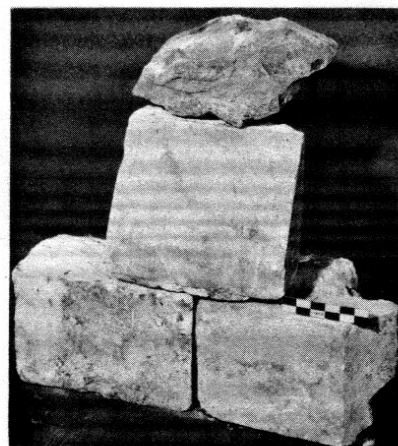
The 19th century Ipswich historian John Glyde noted that a portion of the West Gate was visible in a sewage trench below the property which adjoined the tobacconist's and was only a few steps from Black Horse Lane. Some fragments of the north pier of the gate may survive under buildings on the north side of Westgate Street.

Some idea of the appearance of the gate in the 18th century can be gained from several engravings and a water-colour, inscribed on the reverse: June 24. 1769. This seems to be the source for all the engravings. The first of these, published in Grose's *Antiquities of England and Wales*, 1773-87, already shows variations. The lower part of the structure in the water-colour has the appearance of fine ashlar masonry, which does not agree with the chunk of masonry found in



The east or inner face of the West Gate. Engraving; signed proof. George Frost, (1744 - 1821) (R. 1922-6)

1967. However Grose states that 'the lower part, to the height of about fifteen feet, is of stone; but according to the present barbarous custom, covered with plaister'. In two engravings (of the inner and outer faces of the gate) signed by George Frost, the Ipswich artist (1744-1821) the plaster can be seen peeling off to reveal the flint-work and large coarse stones, with ashlar quoining at the angles. (However, he is not wholly accurate in other respects, since the two 17th century buildings still remaining at the corner of Black Horse Lane and Westgate Street do not appear.) On the other hand the watercolour seems to show the plaster peeling off to reveal brickwork. By 1830 Clark, in his *History of Ipswich*, seems to have interpreted the plaster, marked in imitation courses, as masonry, since he notes that in the rebuilding of the fifteenth century, "the original stone foundation was left to "the height of about fifteen feet "above the ground, upon which the "new brick additions were laid." In fact the ashlar plinth was well buried by 1769, owing to the rise in ground level which is usual in towns. The top nine foot of earth removed in



Four stones from the south pier of the West Gate salvaged in 1967 (R. 1967-58)

1967 was a uniform fill, greyish in colour, below which was a dark layer containing a line of mortar which dipped down sharply from the main plinth. The only find was part of a 16th century frilly based mug lying against the plinth. The two layers of earth may well represent a deliberate raising of the ground level before the 17th century "Feathers" was built.

The site is now occupied by a dress shop, a butcher's and an insurance company.