

4. PORTS

Very little work has been undertaken into discovering and collating the evidence for ports in Roman Britain. Several standard works of reference, for instance Collingwood and Richmond 1969 and Frere 1967, hardly touch the subject. Rivet (1964, 140-162) has listed at least fifteen possible ports, although none of these lie within the region discussed here. At a recent conference on Roman shipping and trade, papers summarising the evidence for harbours in Britain, both N. and S. of Hadrian's Wall, emphasised the lack of evidence and the amount of work that needs to be done (Weeks 1977). Excavations in London on the Old Custom House site have added considerably to our knowledge of Roman harbour works (Tatton-Brown 1974); but as yet no general survey has been undertaken comparable even to that undertaken over 40 years ago for sea and river trade and ports in Roman Gaul (Grenier 1934).

At least four ports within the region may be identified; at Cheddar, Comwich, Crandon Bridge and Ilchester. These must first be examined in detail, before discussing wider questions concerning trade both along rivers and in the Bristol Channel.

Cheddar

A possible port at Cheddar was situated beside the River Yeo some 5 km. (3 miles) above its confluence with the Axe (Rahtz 1966; Hirst and Rahtz 1973). Although there are no known Roman roads leading from the settlement, Cheddar Gorge and Velvet Bottom form a natural route up the Mendip slope to the lead mining settlement at Charterhouse-on-Mendip. The siting was thus ideal for a port connected with the transport of lead (Fig. 11).

The settlement was probably occupied continuously from the late 1st century, until at least the 5th century and possibly later. The absence of mid 1st-century Samian indicates that, if the site was that of a port, it was not used as such during the earliest phase of imperial exploitation of Mendip silver and lead, which had begun by A.D.49.

Evidence from excavations and field observations indicated that the settlement was of 'small town' type, for it extended over an area of at least 2.5 ha. (5 acres), within which were probably several roads. The street identified in the Cheddar Vicarage excavations showed few signs of wear, and it was thus suggested that the main route into the

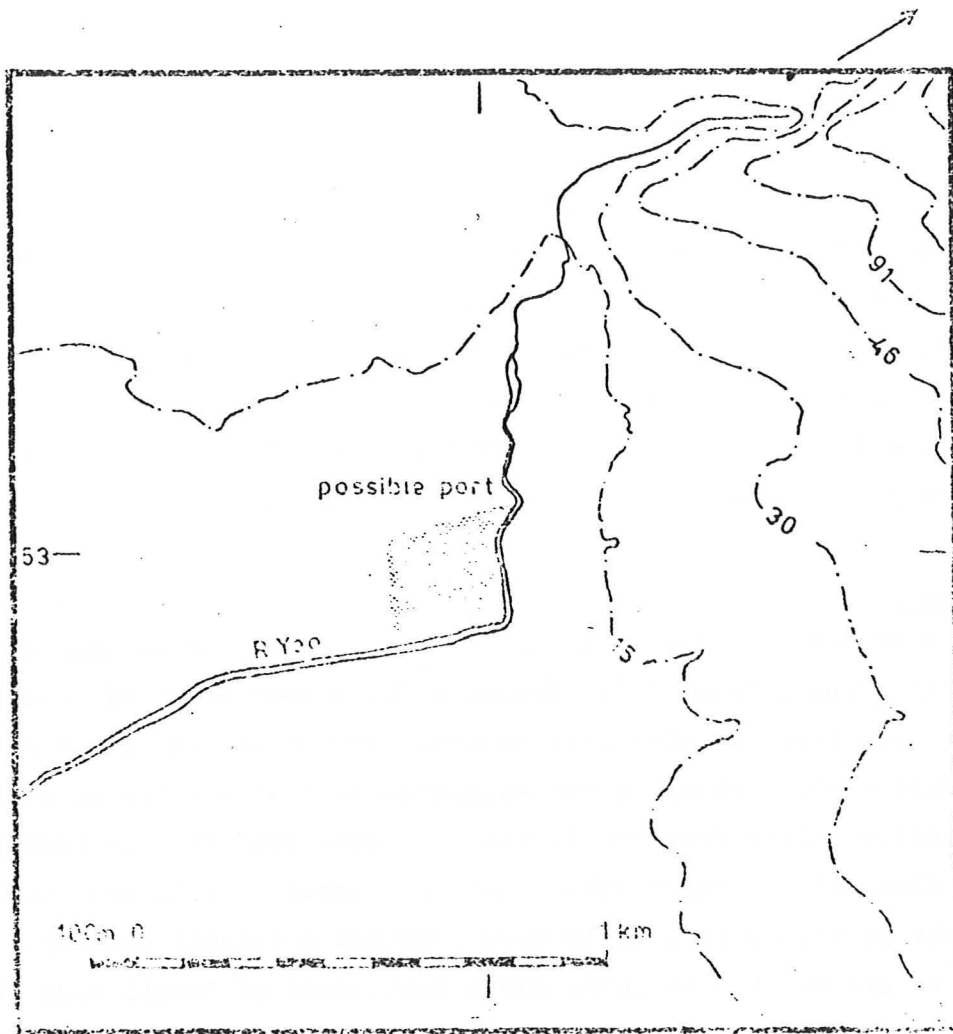


Fig.11 Cheddar, possible port

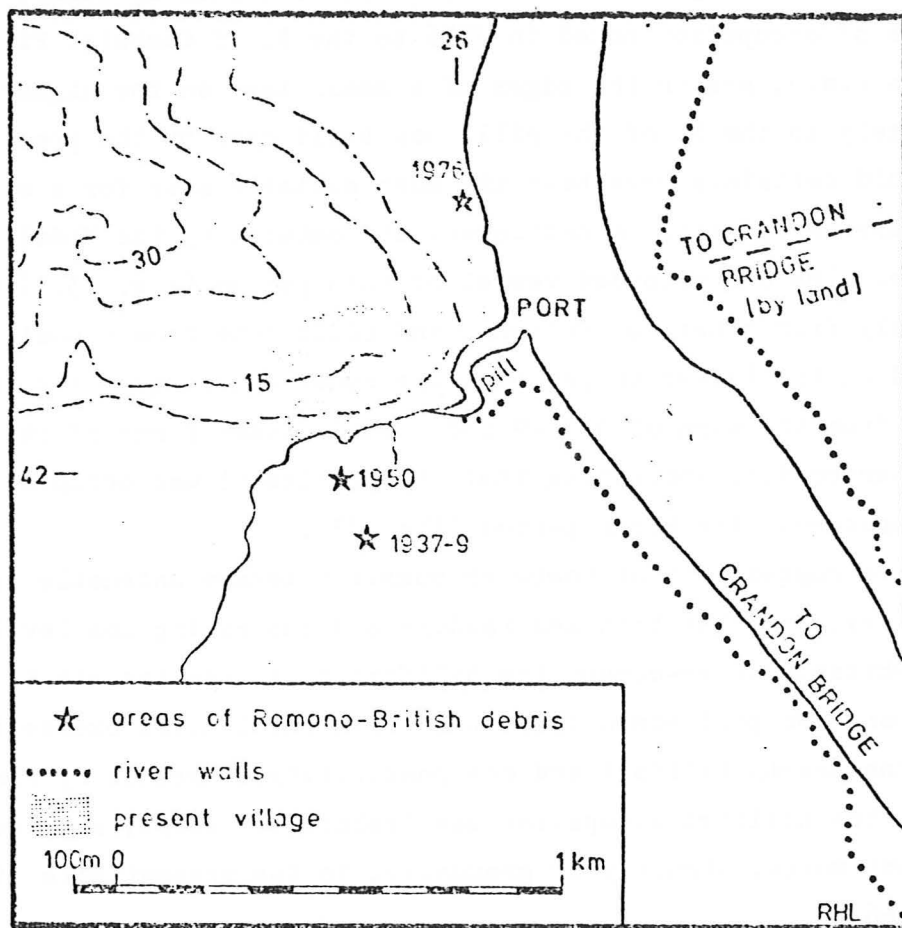


Fig.12 Combwich, possible port

settlement still awaited discovery.

No structures certainly of Roman date were identified, although finds indicated that they must have existed in the vicinity, and that one at least was of some pretensions with painted wall plaster and heated rooms. Two walls and a drain were either later Roman or post-Roman, and could conceivably have been part of one long narrow building fronting the street (Hirst and Rahtz 1973, Y2, Y4, G14).

Combwich

A second possible port was at Combwich, on the W. bank of the Parrett estuary (Fig. 12). Evidence for a settlement of considerable extent was found in clay pits between 1937-39 and was first summarised by Dewar (1940); later it was suggested that it was the site of a port, accessible inland from the E. via the Roman road from Ilchester along the Polden Hills (Rahtz 1969, 60-64). Combwich Pill, draining into the Parrett at this point, would have provided a natural harbour.

At present the evidence for a settlement of 'small town' type is very circumstantial. Although a considerable amount of occupation debris was found, nothing is known of structures or streets within the settlement. It is possible that the finds recorded by Dewar, and evidence of occupation noted in 1976 to the N. of Combwich Pill (Fig. 12; Pike n.d.), are on the edges of a small town on the higher ground immediately to the N. of the pill, now built over by the present village. This would certainly have been the most suitable site for a settlement.

There was possibly a settlement at Combwich by the Middle Pre-Roman Iron Age. The one recorded vessel of this period (Fig. 13.1) was found separately from other collections, and could come from a small area occupied in the Pre-Roman period. The considerable quantity of pottery amassed from the work of 1937-9 and 1976 includes forms of the 1st to 4th centuries A.D. indicating that the settlement was occupied continuously throughout the Roman period (Fig. 13).

Rahtz suggested that Combwich possibly became untenable in the 4th century, and that both sea raiders and the rising sea level forced the inhabitants to re-occupy the hillfort or slopes beneath it at Cannington. No post-Roman finds came from the limited excavation within the nearby hillfort and one possibility suggested by the excavator was that the hillfort occupation was 'relatively short, and that the settlement moved, abruptly or gradually, to the present site of Cannington' (ibid., 66).

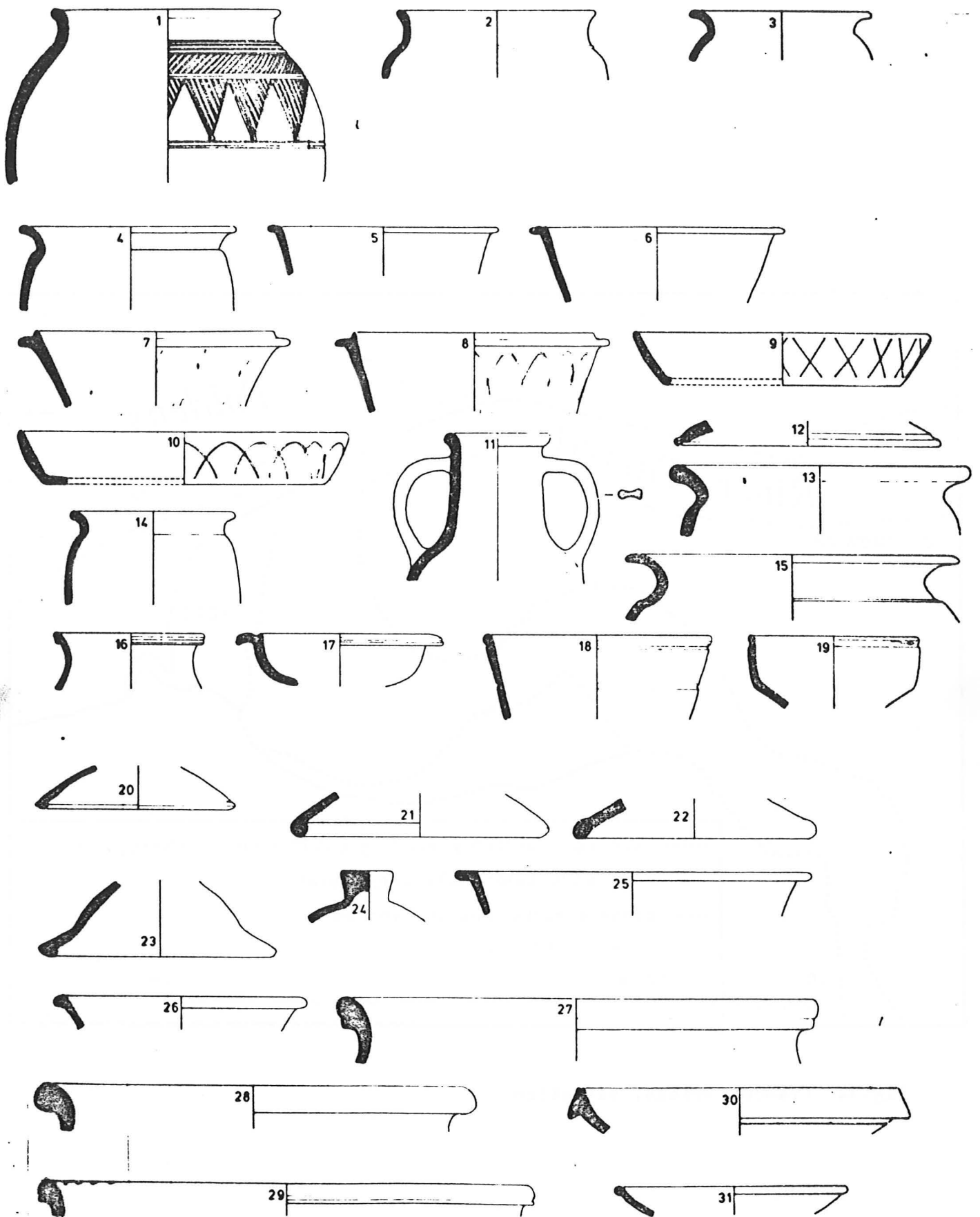


Fig.13 Combwich, pottery

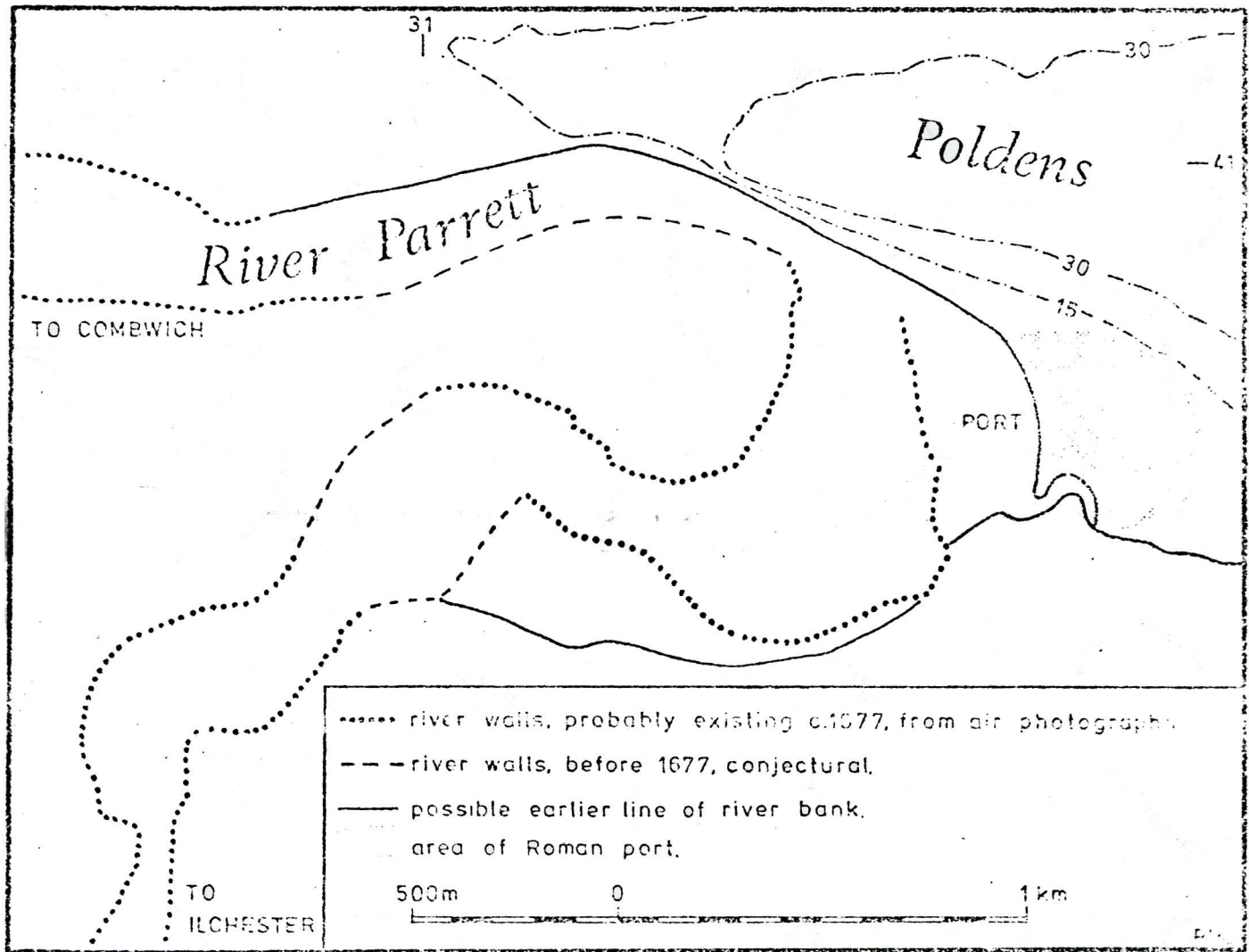


Fig.14 Crandon Bridge, situation

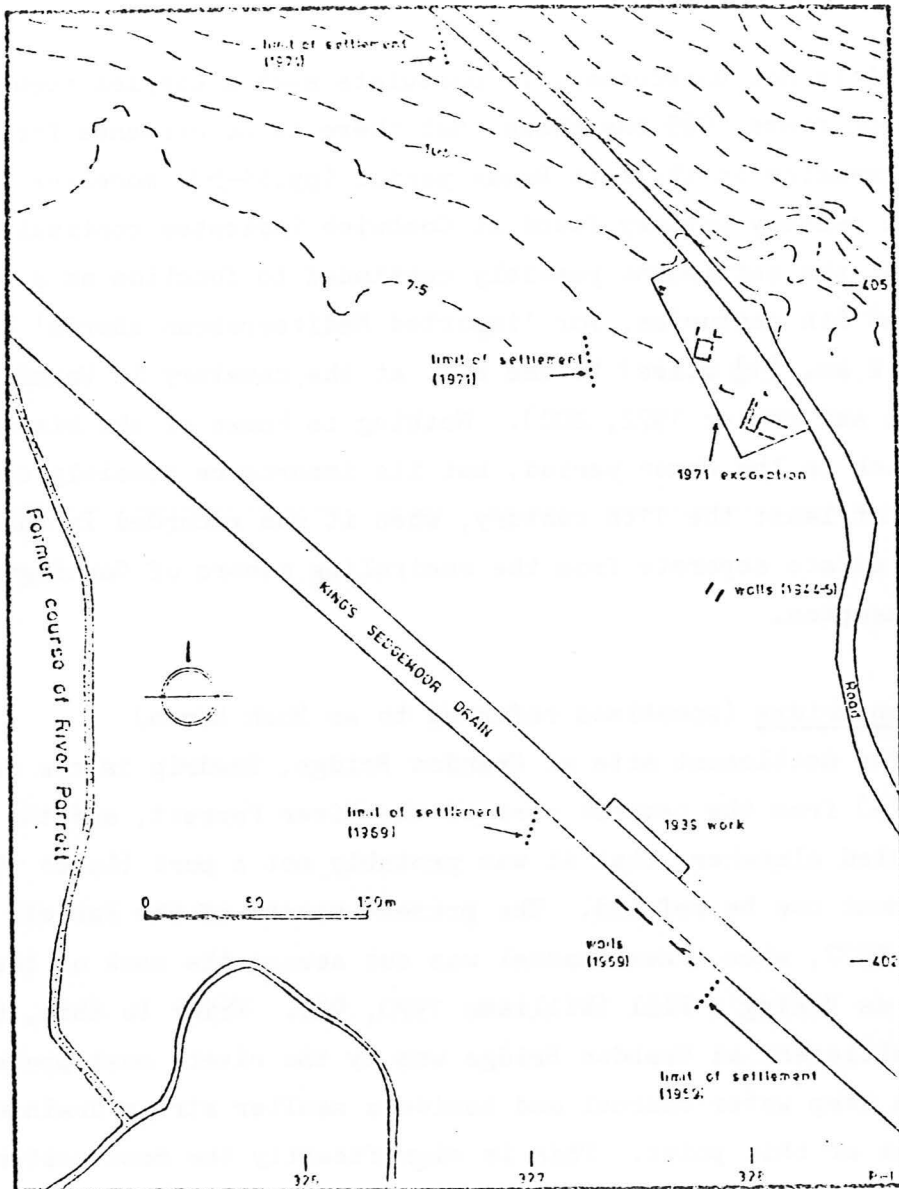


Fig.15 Crandon Bridge, detail

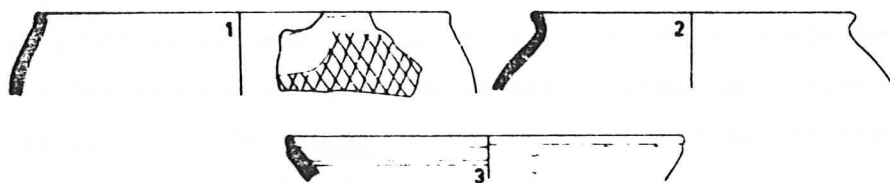


Fig.16 Crandon Bridge, early pottery, collected by Nash in 1969

It is now unnecessary to postulate such a complex sequence of moves. Research since 1969 has shown that there is no evidence for a marine transgression in the late Roman period (pp.33-5); moreover the quantity of 4th century pottery found at Combwich indicates continuing occupation. Indeed, the settlement possibly continued to function as a port into the 5th and 6th centuries, for 'imported Mediterranean sherds' have been found 2 km. ($1\frac{1}{4}$ miles) to the S.W. at the cemetery in Cannington parish (Rahtz and Fowler 1972, 200). Nothing is known of the history of Combwich in the Saxon period, but its importance possibly continued until at least the 11th century, when it was recorded in Domesday Book as an estate separate from the encircling manors of Cannington and Otterhampton.

Crandon Bridge (sometimes referred to as Bush Marsh)

The settlement site at Crandon Bridge, Bawdrip is now over 1.5 km. (1 mile) from the nearest part of the River Parrett, and the writer has suggested elsewhere that it was probably not a port (Lecch 1976a, 155). This must now be refuted. The present course of the Parrett dates from after 1677, when a new channel was cut across the neck of the meander known as Viking's Pill (Williams 1970, 92). Prior to this, the site of the settlement at Crandon Bridge was by the river, most probably alongside a deep water channel and beside a smaller stream draining into the Parrett at this point. This is significantly the most easterly point at which a port could be situated on the Parrett and yet still have access inland along the Polden Ridge.

The map (Fig. 14) showing the location of the Roman port requires some explanation. Williams's assessment of the historical evidence and his small scale plan showing the cut off meander in 1677 are both important sources, but have been supplemented by information plotted from recent air photographs taken in advance of the M5 motorway construction (BKS Air Surveys 623252, 623265). These show the line of early river walls made redundant by the cutting off of the meander in 1677; since Williams demonstrates that land on the E. side of the meander had already been reclaimed as 'warthes' by that date (*ibid.*, 92), it follows that the earlier river bank lay further to the E. It is apparent that successive 'warthes' have restricted the width of the river, which may formerly have been wider both to the N. and S. of the area in question; also prior to reclamation, the river course would probably have altered more

frequently. These factors make any attempt to suggest the exact line of the river bank in the Roman period a near impossibility. Nevertheless, the plan probably shows the approximate earlier course of the river.

Evidence for the site has come from excavations and observations in 1939 (Anon 1940, 174-75), 1944-45 (Anon 1945, 86; Dewar 1953), in 1969 (OS ST 34 SW 7), in 1970 (Nesbitt 1970) and in 1971 (Langdon and Fowler 1971). Together (Fig. 14) these show that settlement extended over at least 7 ha. ($17\frac{1}{2}$ acres) and possibly further, for its limits on the N. have not yet been established. The area examined in detail in 1971 (Fig. 15) was insufficient to say whether or not there was a system of streets within the settlement; the ten structures with stone bases were 'all aligned on the same north and south axis but this was also up and down the south facing slope' (Langdon and Fowler, *ibid.*). These 'were probably warehouses' and it would be of interest to know what their relationship was to the building which possibly had a tessellated floor at the S. and E. end of the known settlement area (Dewar *ibid.*). Further detailed discussion of the buildings is impossible, since the final report on the 1971 excavations is not yet complete.

The finds from the excavations of 1939, 1944-45 and 1971 indicate that the settlement was occupied continuously from the late 1st century A.D. onwards; but the pottery collected from the E. extremity of the site by Nash in 1969 is almost entirely of the 1st century, and moreover includes at least one sherd of Glastonbury ware of the Middle Pre-Roman Iron Age (Fig. 16.1). It is possible that the earliest occupied area has almost escaped detection, so that on the present evidence one cannot determine whether or not there was a flourishing settlement before the late 1st century. It has been suggested that the site was attacked in A.D. 367 (Branigan 1976, Fig. 29), but there does not appear to be any evidence for this. Whether the site continued to function as a port after the late 4th century is uncertain. The 133 coins from the 1971 excavation included 14 issues of 364+ but none of after 375. No imported wares of 5th or 6th century date have been recognised in examination of the amphorae from the site (information from Dr. A. J. Parker). It is possible though, that occupation of the settlement continued, for a manor at Crandon is recorded in 1086, and the 1971 excavations produced evidence for extensive medieval use of the site.

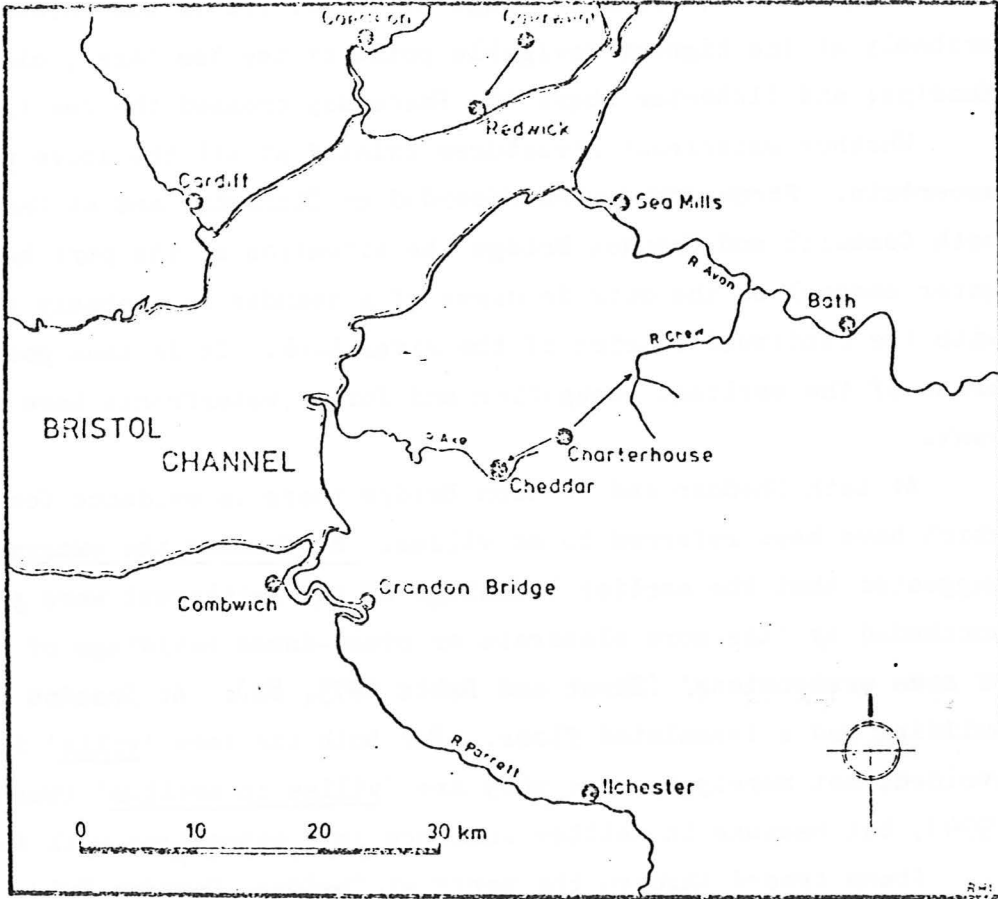


Fig.17 Ports in the Bristol Channel region