

# EXCAVATIONS AT EAST LYNG, SOMERSET 1975

BY P. J. LEACH

## INTRODUCTION

In January 1975, a series of exploratory cuttings was made on a vacant site within the village of East Lyng. Attention was drawn to the site during fieldwork for the Somerset Historic Towns Survey (Aston and Leech, 1976). A proposal for housing development provided the impetus for a limited excavation, the permission for which was readily granted by the owner of the land, Mr. R. J. Barrington of West Lyng. The identification of East Lyng as the site for the Burghal Hidage fort of Lyng (Fig. 1) emphasized the potential importance of any part of the present village threatened by development. With these factors in mind, a limited excavation programme was initiated by the Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset, and financed by the Department of the Environment, as part of the archaeological rescue excavation of, and research project into the historic towns of Somerset.

The areas available for excavation were defined as two paddocks on the south side of, and facing on to the central village street, the A361 Taunton to Glastonbury road (Fig. 3). Within an area of approximately 2,000 square metres covered by the two paddocks, 360 square metres were excavated. The work was undertaken with the aid of a J.C.B. mechanical excavator and a team of eight paid assistants. Five areas were selected for excavation, in an attempt to provide an adequate sample cover. During the four weeks available for excavation, all areas exposed were totally cleared and the recognized archaeological features thoroughly explored. The excavation records and finds will be deposited in the Somerset County Museum, Taunton.

## THE SITE

The modern village of East Lyng is the main focus of settlement for a small parish lying approximately 7 miles (10 km) north-east of Taunton. The settlement is placed at the eastern extremity of a spur of Triassic Keuper Marl, standing above the Somerset Levels and close to the confluence of the Rivers Parrett and Tone (Fig. 2). Less than half a mile to the east (0.6 km) is the Isle of Athelney, an isolated hill of Keuper Marl standing between the drained Levels of Stan Moor and Salt Moor.

The origin of settlement at this site can almost certainly be ascribed to the 9th century and the activities of King Alfred. In a recent paper (Hill, 1967) the case is made for the identification of Lyng as a foundation of Alfred the Great. In summary, it was suggested that two forts were established: one to the east, sharing the Isle of Athelney with the contemporary Saxon monastery; and another to the west, marked by East Lyng, cutting off the spur which forms the dry approach to Athelney (Fig. 3). A bridge is recorded as linking these two forts. Together, these forts are identified as the *burh* of Lyng, recorded in the Burghal Hidage documents of the 10th century.

Of the subsequent history of the site, little can be said relevant to the present context. The Domesday reference is apparently to a very modest settlement at Lyng (VCH, 1906, 469), although the monastic house on Athelney continued throughout the Middle Ages, until its dissolution by Henry VIII. No documentary or physical evidence survives to suggest a continuing military significance for the sites beyond the Late Saxon period. By all indications, East Lyng remained a small village focused upon its medieval church from the 11th century. Neither its proximity to the monastery of Athelney, nor its position astride a medieval route across the Levels linking Glastonbury to Taunton, appears to have significantly influenced its growth.

In the areas excavated, the 'solid' geological formation of Keuper Marl, a fine grained, predominantly red clay, was reached at no great depth. The spur is apparently free from 'drift' deposits, although surrounded on three sides by the recent alluvium of the drained Levels. To appreciate the latter's significance and the true setting of Athelney and Lyng, some reconstruction of the earlier environment must be attempted.

The present state of the moors around Lyng, as throughout most of the Somerset Levels, has been achieved as a result of extensive and continuing drainage and maintenance since the Middle Ages. Whatever the extent and effect of Roman drainage works, by the 9th century contemporary accounts speak of Athelney as being 'surrounded on all sides by very great swampy and impassable marshes' (Stevenson, 1959, 79-80). Today the River Tone is tidal upstream beyond Lyng, and at the period of the latter's foundation it may be imagined as a promontory of high ground, with Athelney as a true offshore island within the tidal marshes. Asser also records a bridge linking the two forts, identified by Hill as being on the site of the existing Balt Moor Wall (Hill, 1967) (Fig. 3). This causeway is recorded as a work of the 14th century, for the purpose of diverting southwards a north-flowing branch of the River Tone (Williams, 1970, 59.). The separation of Lyng and Athelney by this watercourse before the 14th century would account for the 9th-century construction of a bridge linking both sites. Undoubtedly a causeway would have been necessary to approach such a bridge, and there seems no reason to doubt that the present Balt Moor Wall marks this.

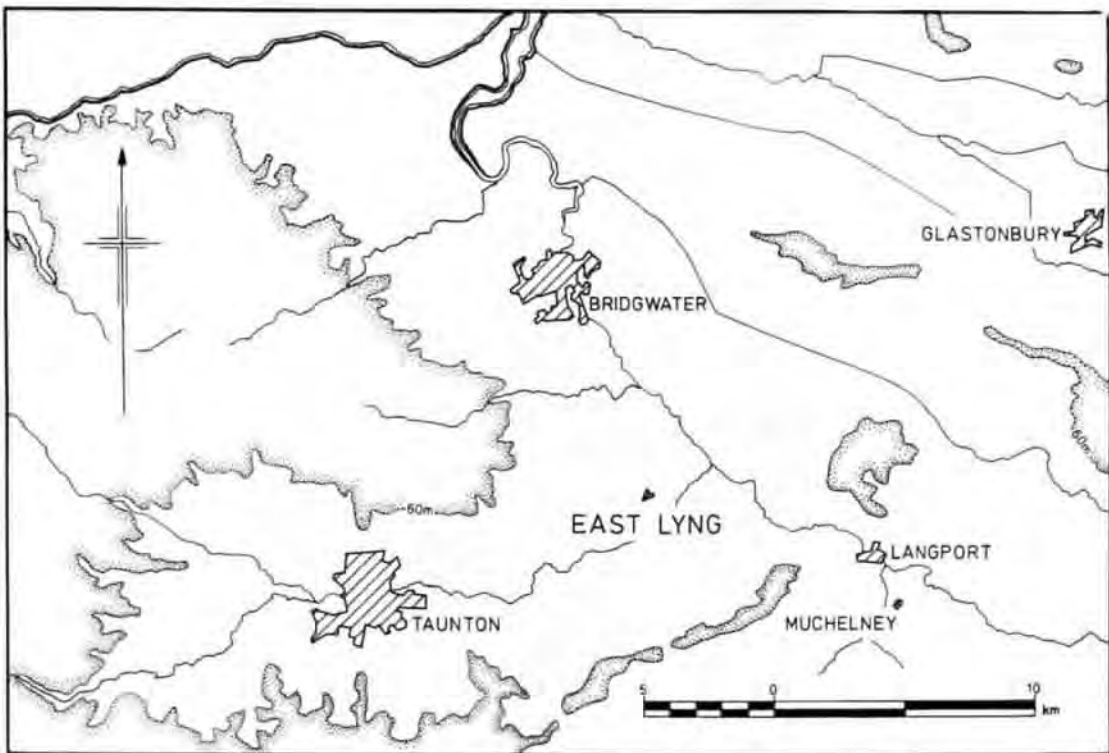
The 'swampy and impassable' tidal marshes which virtually surround Lyng are now the drained Levels of North Moor, Salt Moor and Stan Moor. Although rarely submerged today, the pastures of these moors are founded upon a mixture of peat and river alluvium, indicative of their formerly waterlogged state. Below these deposits lie the estuarine clays of the Parrett and Tone valleys.

### THE EXCAVATION

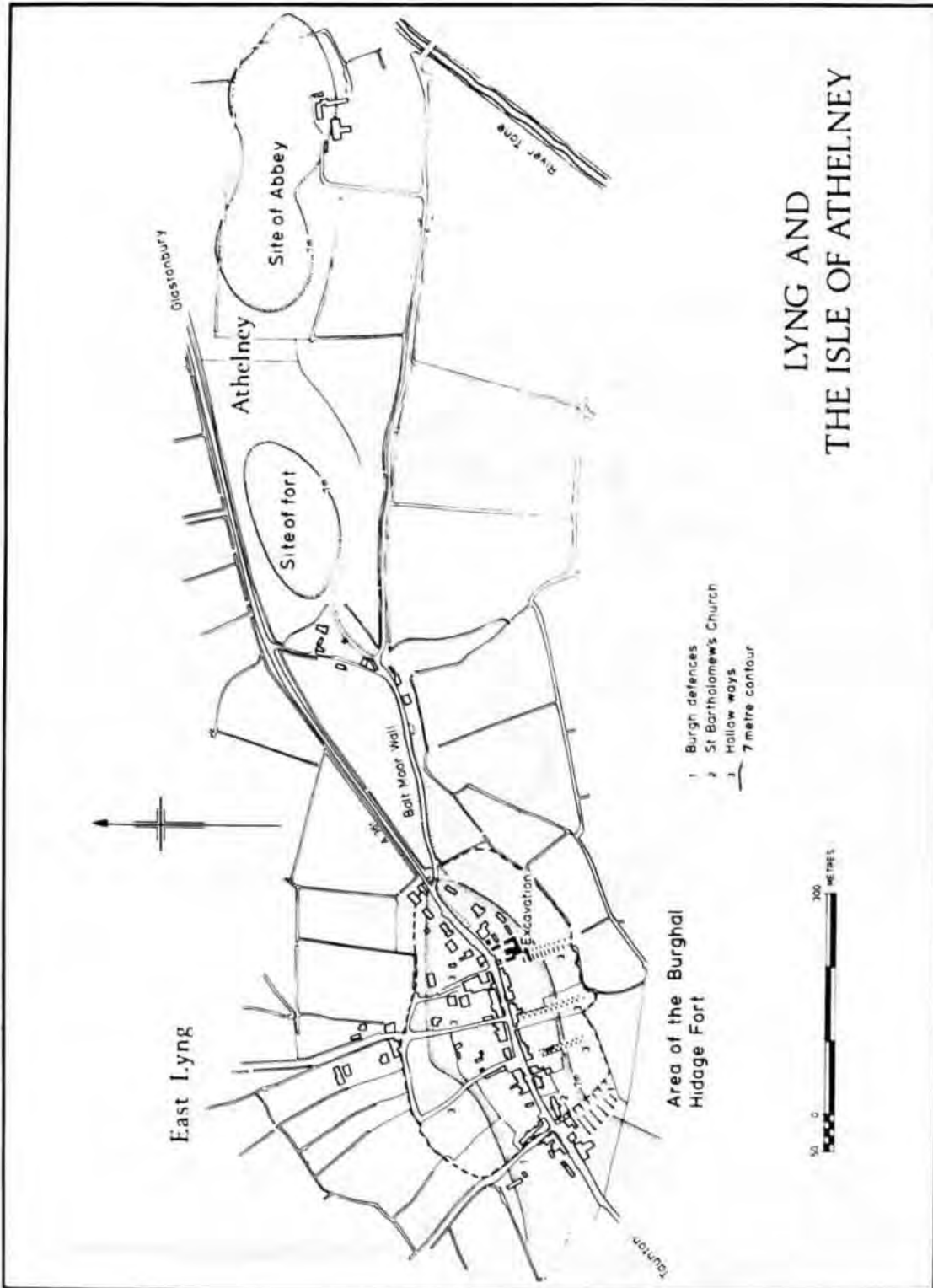
The site available for excavation comprised two small paddocks fronting the main road. That to the east was partly occupied by two cattle byres separated by a concrete yard, and thus not conveniently available for excavation. The larger area to the west was under rough pasture, apart from a garage and shed along the western perimeter. The site as a whole stands near the western end of the Lyng promontory, and thus the ground slopes in two directions: to the north-east down to the Balt Moor Wall approach, and to the south-east down the side of the hill. A slight fall in slope at the east corner, beside the road frontage, reflects a deepening of the road at this point as it descends from the promontory on to the Levels. Within these confines, four cuttings were placed with reference to the topography. The presence of a holloway, immediately outside and to the south-west of the proposed development area, influenced the placing of a fifth cutting (Figs. 3 & 4).

A ten-metre grid, related from a base point to Ordnance Datum and the National Grid, was established for the site and formed a framework from which the position of the five cuttings was determined. A colour code was devised to distinguish the cuttings, those on the road frontage being Green and Red, while the group of three in the south-west corner were Blue. The archaeological features distinguished within each are thus given the prefix GF, RF or BF respectively (Fig. 4). The turf and topsoil layers, being uniform over all the excavated areas, are given the prefix L, applicable to every cutting. The excavation results are presented according to the order of cuttings from north to south. The details of stratigraphy and feature recording have been tabulated and deposited with the excavation records.

# FORTS OF THE BURGHAL HIDAGE



Figs. 1 and 2.



LYNG AND  
THE ISLE OF ATHELNEY

*Green Cutting (Fig. 4)*

An area of 35 square metres was uncovered in the north corner of the site, close to the main road. The only indisputable archaeological feature was a large post-hole, GF.1, apparently of recent origin. Other disturbances of the natural clay were the result of animal burrows or plant roots. From the configuration of the ground, this area of the site has been subjected to levelling, resulting in a sharp drop in the modern ground surface from the area of Red cutting to that at Green cutting. This is borne out by the much thinner turf and topsoil cover and the impression of a horizontally scraped surface to the Keuper Marl beneath.

*Red Cutting (Fig. 4)*

In the only available portion of the south-west paddock, close to the road frontage, an area of 33 m<sup>2</sup> was investigated. With the exception of a modern water-pipe trench, RF.3, in the south-west corner, all the excavated features in this cutting, RF.4 to RF.9 inclusive, appear to belong to a post-medieval cottage recorded on the 1839 Tithe Map for East Lyng (S.R.O.). Pottery and building debris in association with these features suggest a range of activity between the mid-18th and early 20th centuries. The latter date is borne out by demolition of the cottage within living memory. No trace of earlier structures or residual material was found to suggest any pre-18th century occupation in this area.

*Blue Cuttings (Fig. 4)*

To examine rear portions of the site and an area adjacent to the holloway, BF.34, two large cuttings were cleared. Within an L-shaped trench covering 135 m<sup>2</sup>, features of archaeological interest were sparsely distributed. A group at the north end comprising BF.4, 5, 6 and 7 were of recent origin although of indeterminate purpose. To the south, BF.8 and 9 were deeper representatives of otherwise very shallow, parallel grooves, which were not given individual feature numbers. Similar grooves were observed in the other excavated area to the south-west, where only one, BF.21, was individually identified. The only other significant features within the L-shaped cutting were very poorly preserved human remains in a shallow grave, BF.14.

In the second major cutting to the south-west, ploughing grooves, as mentioned above, were observed in its southern half. Parallel to these grooves a shallow gully, F.22 appeared to mark their northern limit. Other shallow pits and post-holes were scattered over this area, those containing datable material being post-medieval. A group of post-holes, BF.24, BF.29, 30 and 31, belonged to a fence boundary, dismantled in recent times. Larger post-holes and depressions north of this, including BF.25, 26 and 28, were probably connected with a recently demolished barn, known to have stood in this area.

The existence of the holloway, BF.34, whose possible significance is discussed below, determined the placing of a small additional cutting, outside the immediately threatened area. Unfortunately this hollow had been utilised as a route for a water-main trench which had largely destroyed its original profile. Nothing survived to indicate a road surface or trackway, although the thin layer of silting which remained contained a few sherds of early medieval pottery.

## DISCUSSION

To summarize briefly the positive results of excavation of the cuttings detailed above, it would appear that they relate almost without exception to activities covering only the past two or three centuries in the history of Lyng. No structural features earlier than the 18th century can be positively identified, although medieval pottery is certainly present in residual contexts. The evidence for ploughing towards the rear

# EAST LYNG

## Site Plan

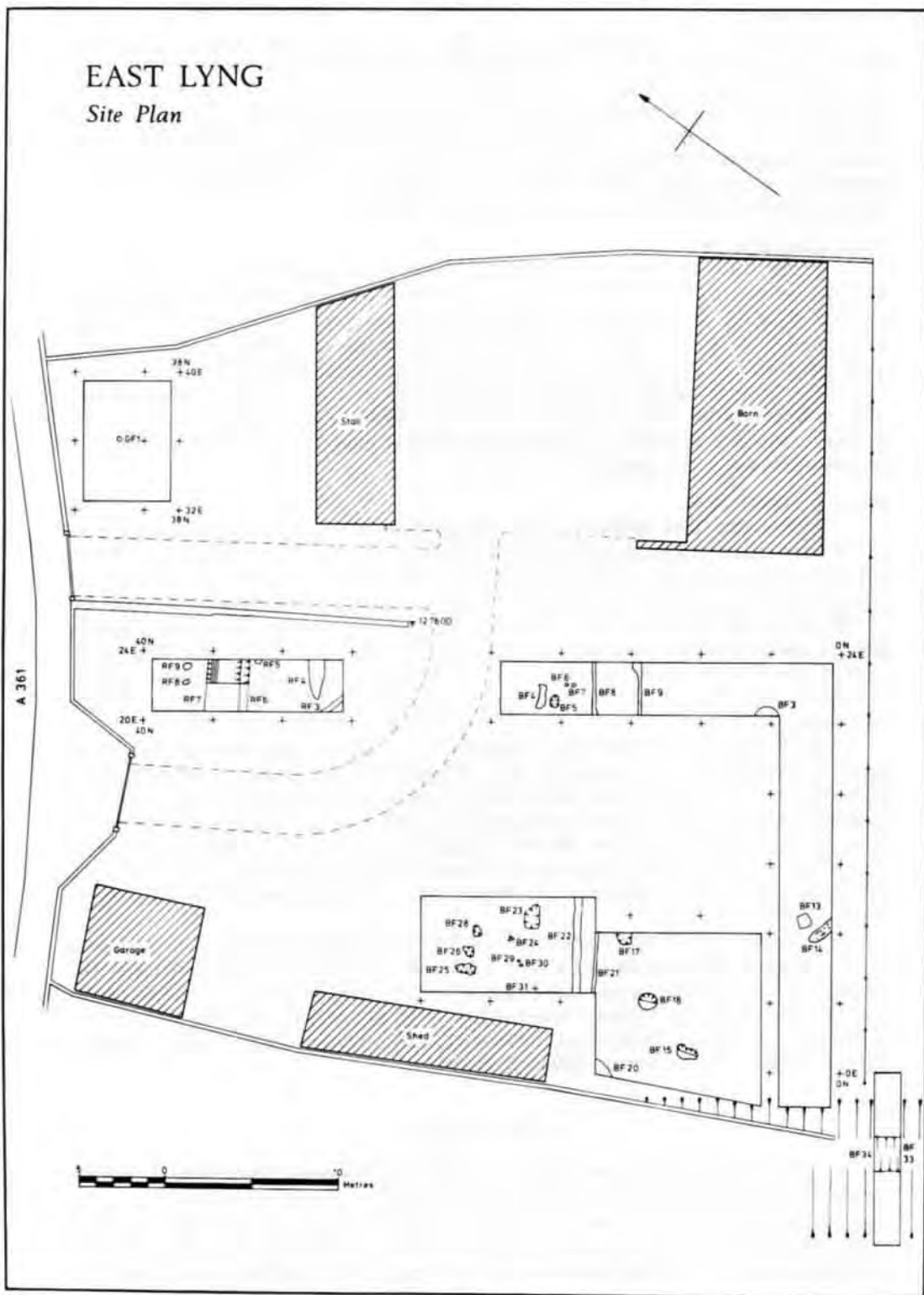


Fig. 4.



of the site is associated with both medieval and post-medieval pottery and may represent this activity over many centuries. The gully BF.22, possibly continued as BF.8, seems to mark the northern limit of this activity, and it may be of some significance that almost all the medieval pottery occurred within features or plough-soil south of this line. The grave, BF.14, had been heavily damaged by agriculture, the bone barely surviving in a shallow scoop. To what this skeleton related is difficult to surmise, since finds and associations are totally lacking, although an east-west orientation does support a Christian and perhaps medieval context.

Perhaps the most significant survival is the holloway, BF.34, in the south corner, which can be clearly traced south-eastwards to the foot of the slope, and less distinctly beneath gardens up to the main road. This feature must be viewed in the context of two further holloways, partly visible behind the village street frontage to the west of the site. On the north side of the main street three more holloways survive, two as open lanes, mirroring those to the south (Fig. 3). Assuming the area of the Late Saxon *burh* to be within the tip of the promontory which is cut off by the bank and ditch line indicated on Fig. 3 (Hill, 1967, 66), the three sets of opposing holloways could be interpreted as a planned internal street system. A similar arrangement can be paralleled at Lydford (Radford, 1970, 94-6) or in a more developed form at Wareham or Cricklade (Radford, 1970, 87 and 91). It has recently been suggested that an element of planning in the layout of streets is a characteristic feature of many Burghal Hidage sites and is one of the earliest instances of town planning in post-Roman Britain (Biddle and Hill, 1971). Thus at Lyng we have the makings of what appears to be a division of the *burh* into sectors or *insulae* based upon a central road with opposing side streets. The very limited excavation of the damaged holloway, BF.34, provided little further information on this point, although what is probably 11th or 12th-century pottery was recovered from a silting layer.

The recognition that a planned element such as a street layout may be a distinguishing feature of the Burghal Hidage forts is also linked with the suggestion that the *burhs* were in part urban foundations (Biddle and Hill, 1971, 83). Where a town or substantial settlement already existed, as at Southampton or Winchester, a garrison for the defence of these strongpoints was readily available. Elsewhere, it must have been necessary to encourage settlement to provide sufficient manpower. This was probably the case at Lyng, and thus it seemed reasonable to expect that some indications of occupation would be recoverable in the vicinity of the street intersections. The apparent total absence of such evidence in the areas excavated is probably explicable in two ways. Firstly, erosion or subsequent disturbances may have removed all traces of primary features on the site. Timber-framed structures without beam slots or post-holes, for example, would leave little or no trace, while the scarcity of diagnostic finds, particularly the rarity of 9th-century pottery identified in Somerset, would add to the difficulties of identification. Alternatively, despite the layout of a street system in anticipation of settlement and infilling, its realization may have fallen far short of this. Large areas within the *burh* may have remained unoccupied, the area of settlement being concentrated close to the church. The position of St. Bartholomew's church seems to be a primary one, astride the *burh* defences (Hill, 1967, 66, n.7), while the dedication itself is not infrequently associated with gates or entrances into medieval towns.

Whichever of these interpretations is correct, and there may be an element of truth in both, Lyng does not appear to have attained urban status. The balance of the evidence, such as it is, is weighted slightly in favour of the second interpretation, as the conditions and degree of disturbance over most of the excavated sites did not appear to have been sufficient to obliterate all traces of early activity, both as structures and portable artifacts. For under-development, the case is apparently borne out by evidence from other *burhs*, e.g. Cricklade

(Haslam, 1975). Whatever the original status or intentions which lay behind the foundation of Lyng, economic and geographic factors eventually outweighed the military considerations, leaving Lyng at a distinct disadvantage. None of the Somerset *burhs* shows much evidence for success in the context of urban development, although Axbridge, Langport and Watchet are all minor commercial centres today, and minted coins for a period either side of the Norman Conquest, in contrast to Lyng. From excavated evidence here and hints from elsewhere, a foundation as a fort of the Burghal Hidage is by no means synonymous with urban status or development, whatever the original intentions. Initially, military considerations were paramount in their establishment and inevitably the siting of certain forts was a distinct disadvantage once the military situation had altered and the economic and geographic factors became dominant. Perhaps Lyng is best considered within the context of a significant minority of forts which are today no more than villages or in some cases empty sites, e.g. Lydford, Halwell, Cissanbyrig, Eashing or Eorpeburnan (Fig. 1).

In strictly archaeological terms, the results of the excavations at Lyng have been virtually negative, but this in itself may have a positive interpretation. On a technical level it was possible to investigate a sufficiently representative area of a Burghal Hidage fort with a minimum expenditure of time and effort. Archaeologically, the adequacy of the sample provides a fairly reliable indicator of what may be expected elsewhere in Lyng. But perhaps more important, the evidence adds weight to the argument that, outside established towns, under-development may not have been unusual within the forts of the Burghal Hidage. In conclusion, two further points should be stressed regarding East Lyng as it exists today. First, that sites with more positive archaeological potential must still remain, notably the junction of the Balt Moor Wall with the promontory, the vicinity of the parish church of St. Bartholomew, and the *burh* defences (Fig. 3). Secondly, that East Lyng preserves important elements within its surviving topography which probably relate to its origin, and that wherever possible, their retention is to be strongly recommended (Aston and Leech, 1976).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of the Committee I should like to express my appreciation of the willing co-operation of the landowner, Mr. R. J. Barrington of West Lyng, in making the site available for excavation. The work was carried out under my direction, with members of the C.R.A.A.G.S. Permanent Field Team: R. G. Browse, D. Fine and D. Zienkiewicz, assisted by Miss A. Adcock, Miss W. Butler, Miss D. Edwards, R. McDonnell and R. Tabor. Thanks are also due to Mr. Colin Clements for the availability and operation of his J.C.B. machine in both the opening and backfilling of the site. I am additionally grateful to Messrs. T. Pearson and M. W. Ponsford for their examination of and comments upon the medieval and post-medieval pottery.

#### APPENDIX

##### THE FINDS

P. J. LEACH AND T. PEARSON

In view of the general paucity, recent date and fragmentary nature of the material recovered in excavation, it was not considered necessary to provide an itemised descriptive table of finds or to illustrate individual pieces, excepting three sherds (Fig. 5).



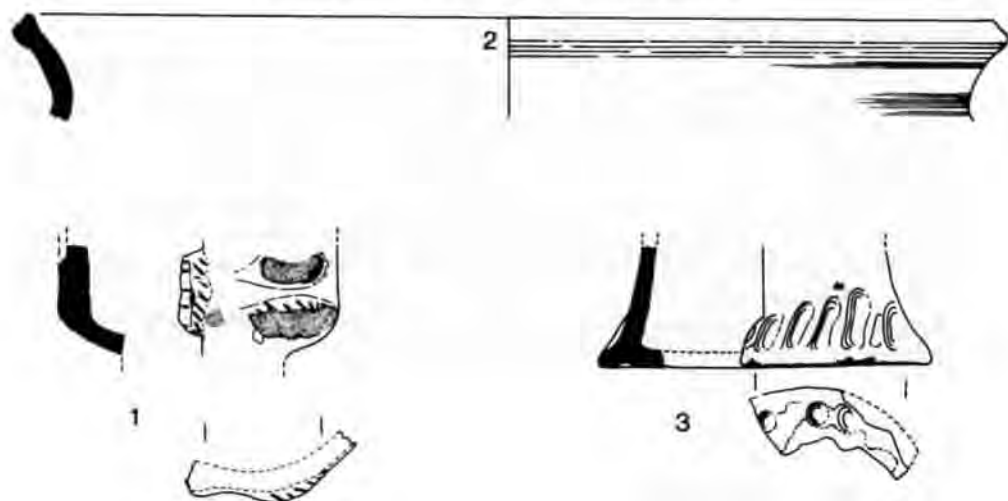


Fig. 5.

Of a total of 157 sherds excavated, 34 (22%) could be ascribed to the medieval period (c. 11-14th centuries). This group was composed of cooking pots (Fig. 5.2), jug body and base sherds (5.3) and one sherd probably from a chafing dish (5.1). The cooking pot and jug sherds are comparable to the large assemblages of material from Taunton (Bennett and Pearson, forthcoming). Closer dating of the coarse wares is not really possible in view of the few reliably dated sequences and the inherent faults of typological comparison (Hurst, 1962-63).

The remaining 78% of the pottery is post-medieval (17th-19th centuries). The bulk of the earthenwares derive from the Donyatt kilns (Coleman-Smith and Pearson, 1970 and forthcoming) as well as small groups of Bideford and Barnstaple coarse wares (Watkins, 1960) and Staffordshire or Bristol fine slipwares (Barton, 1963). The largest group in this period derives from the late 19th and early 20th century factories producing white industrial and blue transfer-printed wares. A complete catalogue of the pottery recovered has been deposited with the excavation records.

Of the remaining finds, a variety of categories was represented, including: clay pipe fragments; glass from vessels and windows; building materials, principally brick; pantiles and plaster fragments; iron objects including nails and pieces of agricultural implements; and other miscellaneous items of metal including two illegible bronze coins and a 19th-century token, also illegible. In most instances this material can be assigned to the 18th century or later.

Organic material, unless of very recent date, does not appear to survive well in the soil conditions encountered. Recent burials of a dog and two sheep were exhumed in a virtually complete state. Elsewhere, domesticated animal bones were scattered within features or in the topsoil, but frequently in a fragmentary condition. The very poor preservation of the human remains rendered their removal and examination almost impossible and consequently little additional information is available. Only a few portions of the long bones survived in recognizable form, but the burial appeared to have been that of an articulated adult, age and sex uncertain, placed within a shallow grave. Plough damage had undoubtedly contributed towards the disturbance of the grave.

*Description of the illustrated pottery (Fig. 5)*

1. Chafing dish, small cup, body sherd: the lower part of a roughly cylindrical-sided vessel probably attached to a slightly raised base. The fabric is reduced blue/grey and hard fired with sparse quartzitic grits. Externally and internally covered with a badly developed olive green glaze; internally burnt and encrusted. Probably 14th century.
2. Cooking pot or storage vessel; rim sherd, everted. Oxidised external surface, orange/buff with reduced blue/grey core and black internal surface. Finger-smoothed externally and internally. Hard fabric with quartz and quartzite grits. 12th to 14th centuries.
3. Jug, base sherd, thumbed above and below. Oxidised orange to buff surfaces with reduced blue/grey core. External patchy orange to green lead glaze. 14th century.

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