

Archaeology Series No.4

NEWPORT ARCH, LINCOLN



Fig. 1 Newport Arch from the south, by William Stukeley, 1722

INTRODUCTION

Newport Arch, the north gateway of the Roman city of Lincoln, is without a doubt one of the most famous Roman monuments in Britain. Built about 200AD, it is still being used by traffic some eighteen hundred years later. Over the last two hundred and fifty years it has been drawn and painted; photographed and recorded on numerous occasions and today serves as a constant reminder to both townspeople and visitors of Lincoln's origins as a Roman military fortress in the mid-60sAD, and her subsequent development as one of the foremost Roman towns in the country.

The earliest surviving drawing of Newport Arch is by the Lincolnshire antiquary, William Stukeley (1687-1755), which shows the south side of the gate in 1722 (Fig. 1). Above the central archway were eighteen courses of small stone blocks with two rows of square 'putlog' holes, designed to locate timber scaffolding poles, while on the eastern side was a smaller archway for pedestrians which at some unknown date had been blocked with stone. Today much of the superstructure visible in the eighteenth century has disappeared, and the side passage, which had served in the latter part of the eighteenth

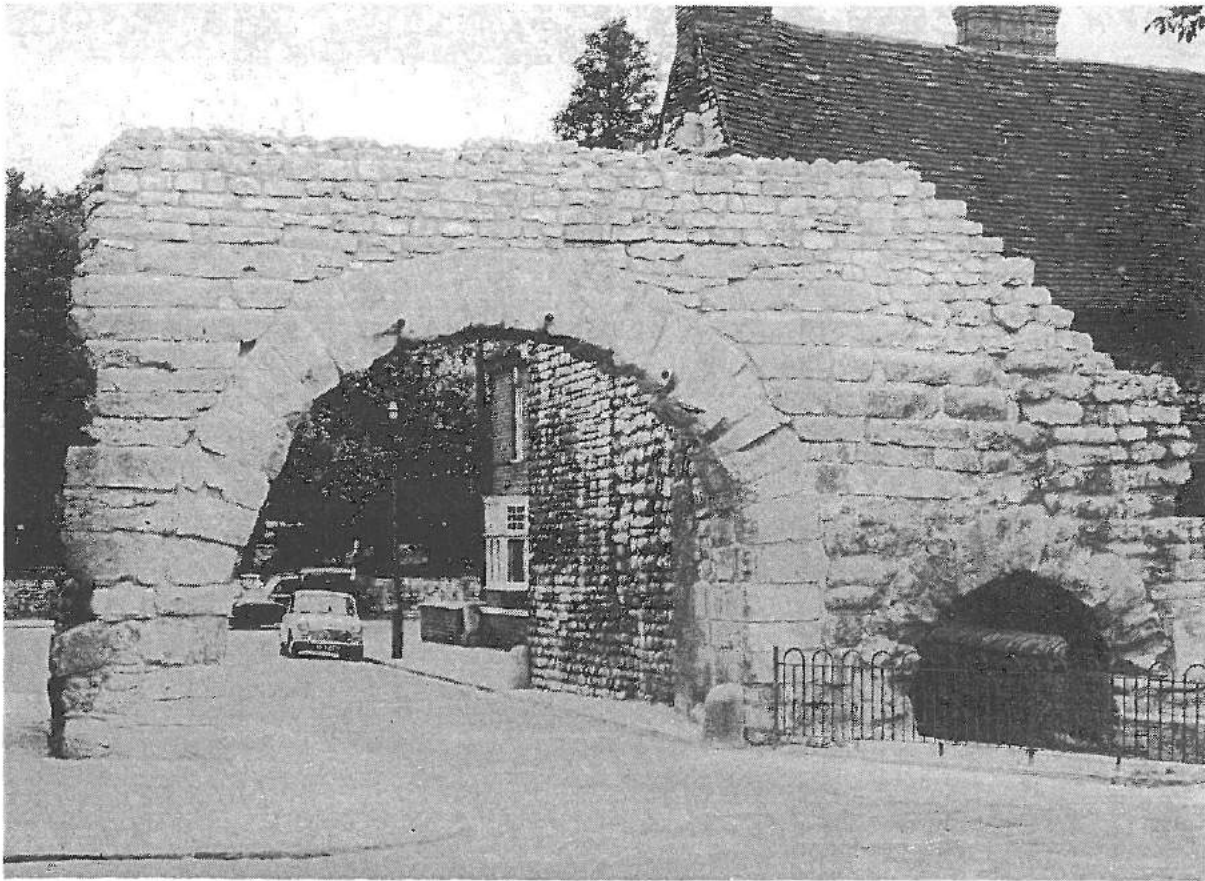


Fig. 2 Modern view of Newport Arch from the south

century as a cellar for the cottage to the east, has reverted to its original function (*Fig. 2*). It was reopened in 1825.

On the western side of the central archway, Stukeley's drawing shows a house built hard up against the gate. This house, which had been built in 1717, was replaced by another house in 1824, and during the building work the collapsed rear arch of another pedestrian passageway was noted and recorded by the Lincoln historian Edward James Willson (1787-1845). In October 1937, when this early nineteenth-century house was itself demolished, and the Co-operative Society's shop built further to the west, staff of the City and County Museum confirmed that a western pedestrian passageway had in fact existed as an integral part of the Roman gateway, and were able to show that the south face of the gateway was of symmetrical construction with a central carriageway 4.87m (16ft) wide, and a footway 2.1m (7ft) wide on either side.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

But the most spectacular advances in our understanding of the Roman gateway came in mid-1954, when two cottages to the north of the Co-operative Society's shop were demolished, and their site was made available for archaeological excavation by the Lincoln City Council. The archaeologist, F.H. Thompson, then at the City and County Museum, who carried out the excavation was able to show convincingly that much of the Roman gateway which survived below ground had served as the foundation for a mediaeval gateway built on the same spot, possibly in the latter half of the eleventh century. It was below the remains of this later gateway that the evidence which had eluded the early antiquaries and archaeologists for so long was finally brought to light.

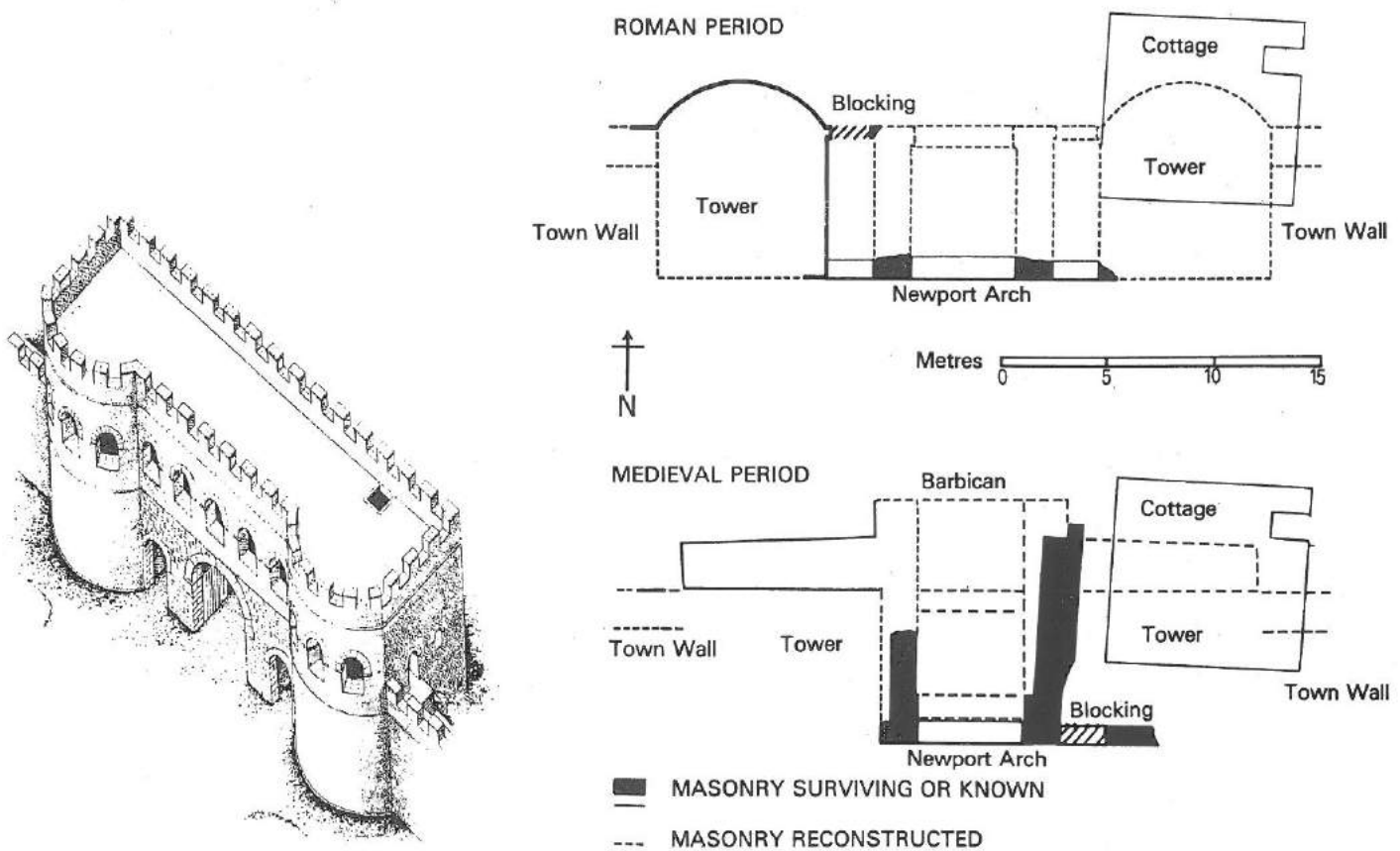
THE ROMAN GATEWAY (*Fig. 3*)

Below the foundations of the west side of the mediaeval gateway lay the curved front of a massive Roman gate-tower which survived to a height of 1.8m (6ft). On its western

side the base of the tower adjoined the front face of the Roman Town wall which had been built about 100AD and which was still standing at this point to a height of 1m (3ft). On the eastern side of the front of the tower, Thompson discovered both sides of the front face of the side passage which had been previously recorded in 1824 and again in 1937. This passage had been blocked up, probably in the late Roman period, in a similar way to the south face of the eastern side passage shown in Stukeley's drawing.

The layout of the gateway was now at last apparent — a central carriageway 7.3m (24ft) in depth and 4.87m (16ft) wide, with a pedestrian passageway 2.1m (7ft) in width on either side, and two massive flanking gate-towers with curved fronts projecting a little in front of the town wall. Newport Arch, for long the only visible component of this monumental structure, is simply part of the rearward face of what would have been an extremely imposing entrance into the Roman town (*Fig. 3*).

By analogy with the Roman East Gate, excavated between 1959 and 1966, there seems every likelihood that the Newport gateway replaced an earlier timber gateway of military



*Fig. 3 The Roman North Gate — reconstructed view by D. Neal
Reconstructed plans of the Roman and mediaeval north gate*

construction, which had been refurbished with a stone facing at the time that the site of the Roman fortress was handed over to the civilian authorities for development as a town in about 100AD. No evidence of this suggested earlier gateway was however found in 1954.

THE MEDIAEVAL GATEWAY (*Figs. 3-5*)

The two stone walls projecting from the north side of Newport Arch are of mediaeval date, and are all that remains standing above the modern ground surface of the mediaeval successor to the Roman gate. The 1954 excavations showed that the Roman gate had been mostly destroyed by the time the mediaeval gate was constructed and that its layout was different to that of its predecessor. Gone were the two pedestrian

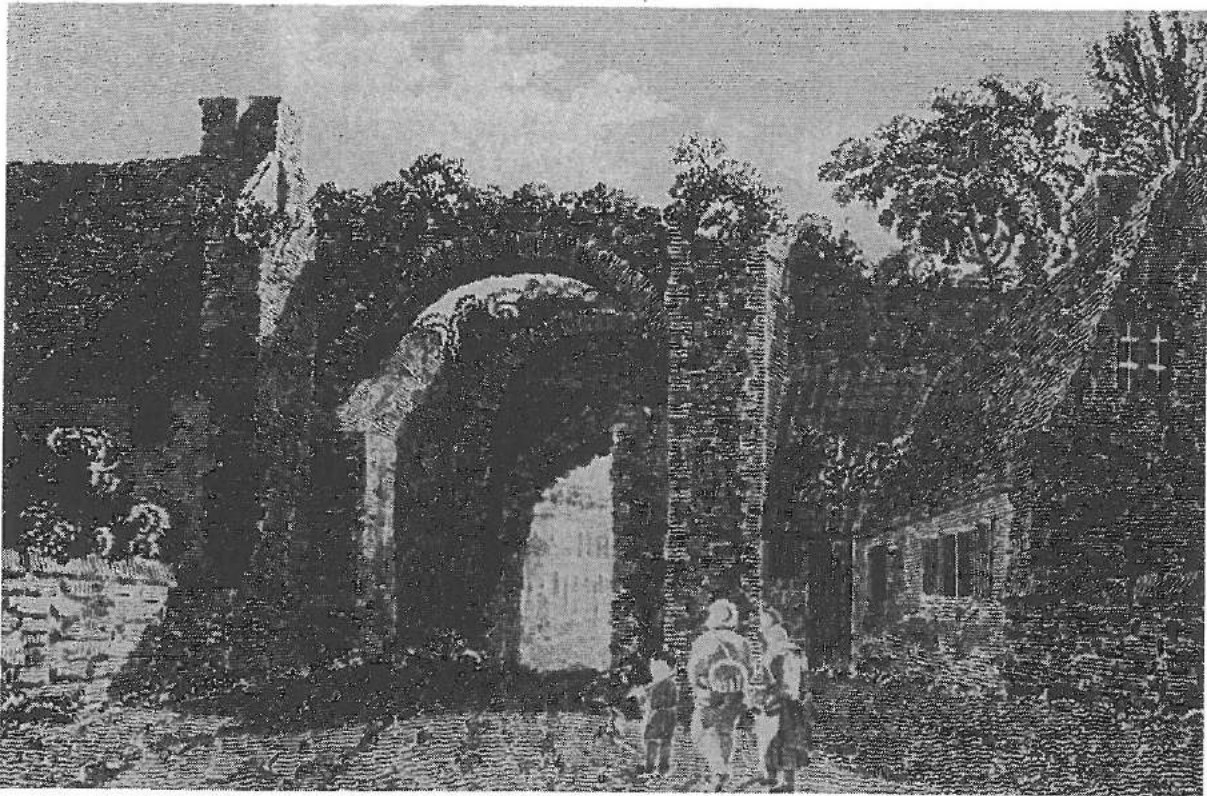


Fig. 4 Eighteenth-century view of the mediaeval gate from the north by R.D. Poilicy

passageways, and only the central carriageway was now retained in use. Little is known of its original appearance, although an eighteenth-century drawing by R.D. Poilicy shows part of the later gateway from the north (*Fig. 4*). Two mediaeval arches can be seen in front of Newport Arch with flanking walls projecting a little further forward, perhaps originally forming part of a 'barbican' or defended enclosure in front of the gate. The northernmost arch may perhaps have been in a position similar to that of the front arch of the Roman gate, giving a carriageway 4.87m (16ft) wide and about 10.6m (35ft) long. The position of the southern arch is shown today by the pair of buttresses built against the north face of Newport Arch (*Fig. 5*). On either side of the gate passage there may have been square or rectangular towers, but insufficient evidence is available for an accurate reconstruction. The date at which the gate was erected is also not known for certain. The excavator believed the gate to have been built in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, but until further excavation is carried out here this must remain a possibility rather than a fact.

THE 1964 DISASTER (*Figs. 6 and 7*)

In May 1964 a heavy lorry travelling south through Newport Arch struck one of the stones in the arch. The crown of the arch and part of the superstructure collapsed on to the roof of the lorry. In the restoration which followed, the stones were each numbered and their positions recorded before they were removed by crane and the lorry released. The damage to the arch was found to be far more serious than originally believed, and almost the entire arch ring had to be removed and reconstructed around a timber framework. The operation was carried out by the City Engineer's Department and the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments Works Department, and took place between 18th May and 3rd August 1964, when the gate was once again open to traffic.

NEWPORT ARCH TODAY

The evidence found in the 1954 excavation was felt to be sufficiently important for the excavation site to be left open and the masonry preserved, and this can be seen today a



Fig. 5 Newport Arch from the north

little to the north-west of Newport Arch. The difference between the modern and Roman ground levels is easily seen here, and something of the scale of the Roman gateway can be appreciated. The mediaeval masonry footings overlying the Roman gate tower can be clearly seen and these have been cut through to show the front face of the western Roman side passage. It is important to note that the modern ground surface is some 2.4-3.04m (8-10ft) higher than the original Roman ground surface and this build-up in ground level gives Newport Arch today its somewhat squat appearance.



Fig. 6 The 1964 disaster

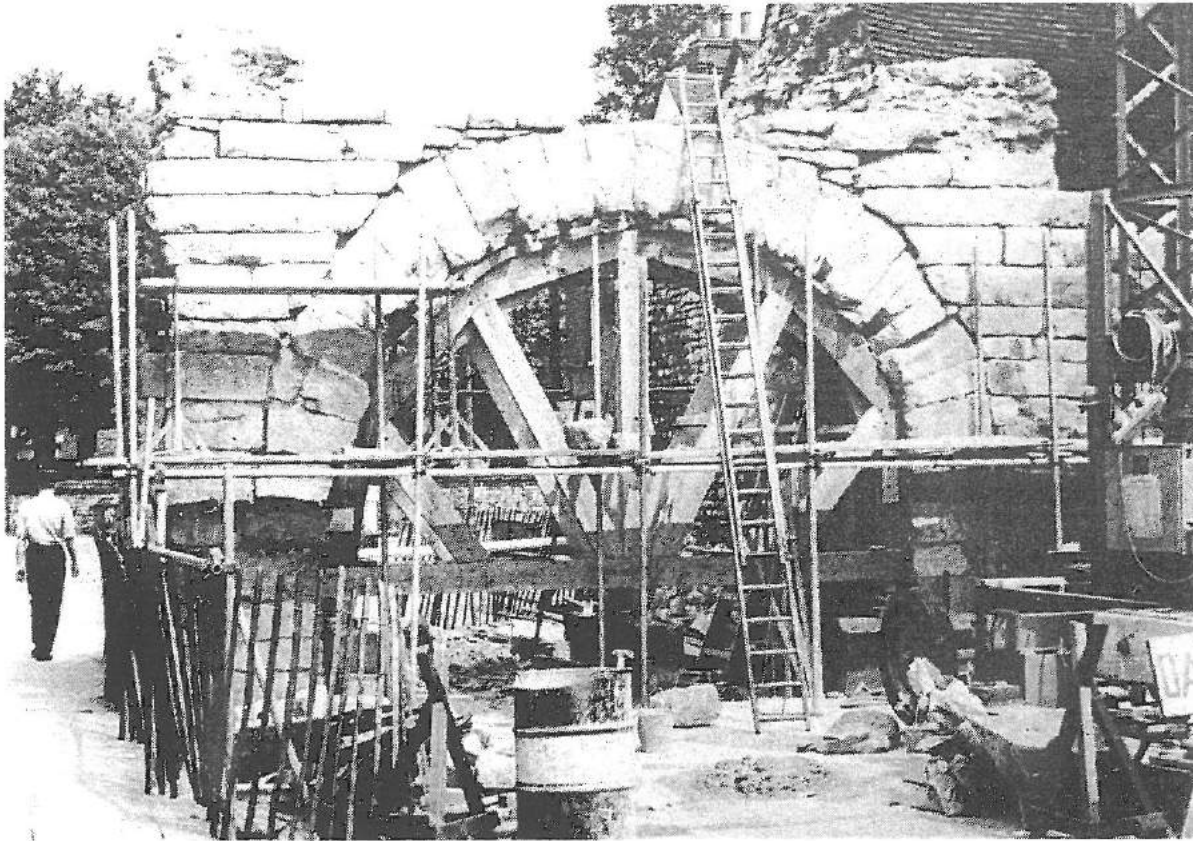


Fig. 7 Reconstruction of Newport Arch in progress

SOURCES

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'The Gates of Roman Lincoln' by F.H. Thompson and J.B. Whitwell in *Archaeologia CIV* (1973) 129-207.

'*Mediaeval Lincoln*' by Sir Francis Hill (Lincoln, 1948).

'*A Visitors Guide to Roman Lincoln*' by Timothy Ambrose and Andrew White (City and County Museum, 1978)

Information held on the County Archaeological Sites and Monuments Index in the City and County Museum, Lincoln.

Information held on the illustrations index at the Usher Gallery, Lincoln.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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City and County Museum, December 1978



Lincolnshire