

# MAYOR'S AVENUE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION DARTMOUTH 1995

**Background** An archaeological excavation is being carried out by Exeter Archaeology prior to the construction of a Co-op supermarket and flats on the old bus depot site in Mayor's Avenue. Trial excavations in late 1994 revealed the presence of early remains on the site. The current five-week dig finishes on July 14th. The land in this part of Dartmouth was progressively reclaimed from the inter-tidal foreshore of the Dart estuary between about 1200 and the 1880s.

**Undercliff** is the little lane running along the back (north) side of the site. This follows the natural medieval shoreline of **Hardness**, the northern suburb of Dartmouth, whose houses extended along the edge of an east-west creek of the Dart that separated Hardness from the town centre to the south. The inhabitants of Hardness were mostly mariners, fishermen and shipbuilders.

**Early quays** The earliest pottery from the site dates from the 12th century. A sherd from a pot made in London attests to Dartmouth's importance as a deep-water port in the medieval period, when its ships were engaged in the Bordeaux wine trade and naval expeditions assembled here. Four properties (**A–D**) were built out onto the foreshore within the excavation site between the early 16th century and the 1630s. The earliest quay (**A**) lay on the west side of the site and may have extended under the George & Dragon as far as Zion slip. By 1600 a second quay (**B**), with a house on it, had been built to the east of **A**, and a little public lane or slip ran down onto the foreshore between them.

**Early shipyards** Hardness was the main shipbuilding area in Dartmouth from the 12th century down to the late 19th century. In the early days vessels were built on the open beach but by 1600 docks and raised slipways were being constructed in Hardness which were perhaps the first large permanent shipyard structures to be erected there.

**Oliver's Yard (C)** was a shipyard built in the early 17th century. It comprised a sloping cobbled yard and slipway with the master shipwright's house at its head next to Undercliff. A cobbled entrance passage led through the house into the higher part of the yard, which was flanked by a bow-sided building on the west, and a long open-fronted shed on the east that contained a saw-pit and extended southwards onto a narrow quay next to the building slip. An open-fronted linhay with a rounded corner occupied the NW head of the slipway, its outline now marked only by the line of a deep eavesdrip gully formed in the cobbled surface. A ship under construction on the building slip would have been supported on a timber cradle that extended further down the foreshore. The yard continued in use through the 18th century, eventually being owned by a shipwright named John Oliver.

A further shipyard was established in **D** in 1634. Little is known about this yard as it lies well below the modern ground level. It may have taken the form of a long dock.

**Follett's shipyard** From 1808 properties **A–C** were successively acquired by William Follett, a master shipwright who had come to Dartmouth from the Royal Naval Dockyard at Chatham in Kent, and was followed in the business by his sons Samuel and Henry, and grandson Frederick. In its final form the combined yard comprised two shipbuilding docks (in **A** and **B**) and a slipway (in **C**), five long sheds with lofts above, at least two sawpits, one dwelling house and two cottages.

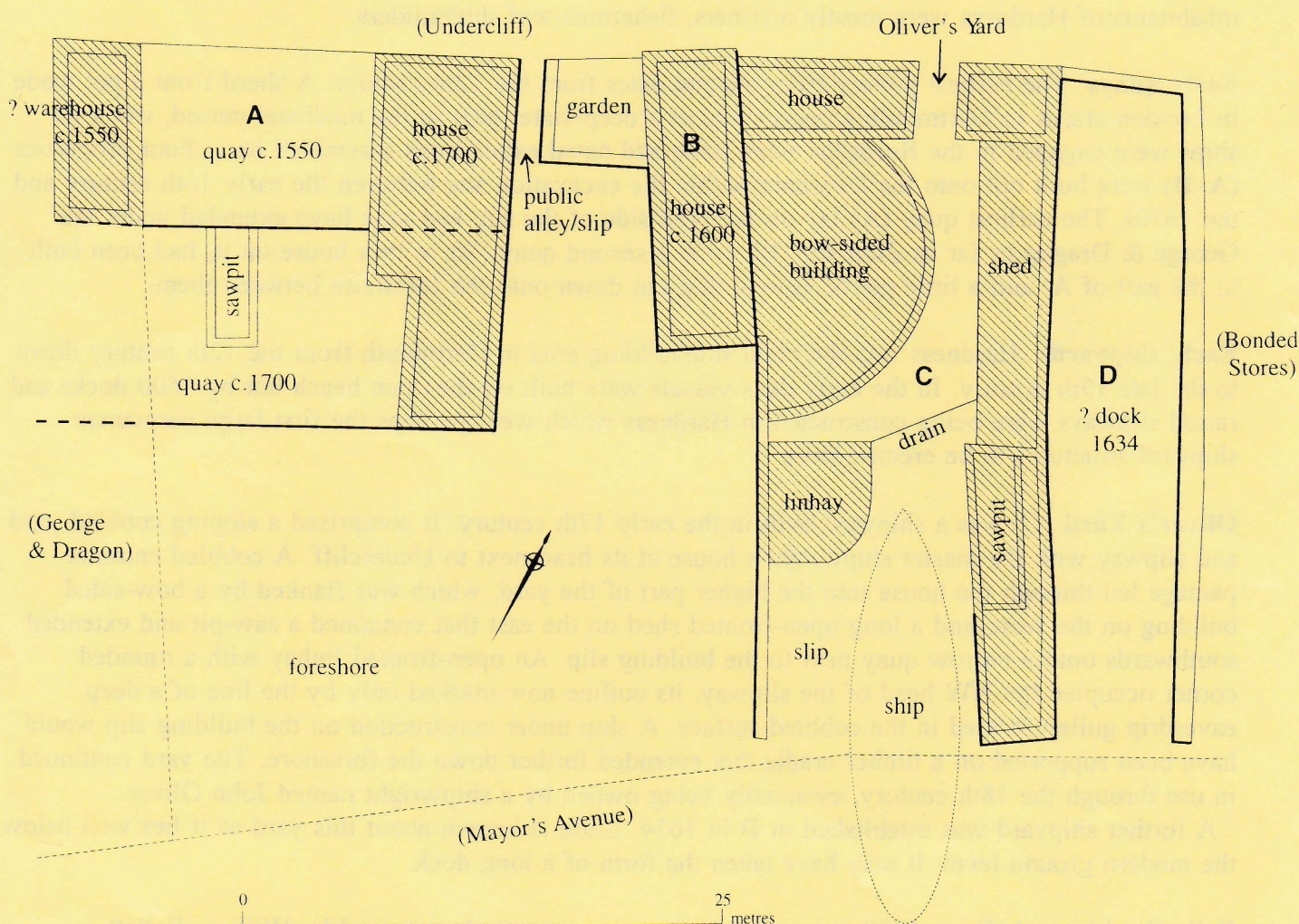
Follett's Yard built 27 vessels between 1824 and 1851, or one every year. These were mainly schooners of 120–175 tons, all built in wood. Frederick Follett was declared bankrupt in 1868.

**Bonded Stores** The building with five wide doorways and little round-headed windows on the east side of the site is a bonded warehouse, which has been occupied by W. A. Hawke and Son Ltd since the 1890s. When the stores were built in the 1810s, the underlying shipyard was infilled with mud dredged from the harbour.

**Reclamation** of the former creek took place in this area in two stages, between 1868 and 1884, when the 'Pool' – which stank horribly – was finally filled in and the Northern Embankment created.

**Mayor's Avenue** was laid out soon afterwards. The site now lies 120m from the waterfront.

**Finds** from the site include sherds from rare Iberian and Italian earthenware vessels brought back to Dartmouth by merchants or fishermen returning from the Newfoundland fishery from ports on the Atlantic seaboard



*Reconstructed topography of the site in the 16th to 18th centuries*

**Preservation** The excavations on the site are sponsored by the Plymouth and South Devon Co-operative Society Ltd and W. H. Estates Ltd in advance of the redevelopment. The foundations of the new buildings erected on the site will be designed as far as possible to minimize disturbance to the buried remains, which have been thoroughly recorded.