

French Foreign Legion forts

Wargames models described by **Terry Wise**

THE AIRFIX PLAYFORT kit, Fort Sahara, is a remarkably accurate model as it stands and quite adequate assembled straight from the box but, just as model soldier enthusiasts prefer to mount their latest figure on a dioramic base, and sometimes make adjustments to the figure itself, so I prefer to look at other types of kits and say, 'Yes, this is good, and basically correct, but how can I improve on it; how can I bring it to life; how can I turn this mass-produced kit into an individual model — *my* model?'

First, therefore, let us look for faults to be rectified.

1 The model is too small and courtyards were generally bigger than this in proportion to the walls.

2 As you can see from the photographs of the forts in the Sahara, by the 19th Century it was normal to have firing slits, not the more open battlements, and towers were not much higher than the walls. Neither of these faults can be rectified without cutting the kit into fragments, and they have to be accepted unless you wish to scratch-build.

3 There *must* be a well, or at least some means of catching and storing rain water.

4 A few trees would grow, providing essential

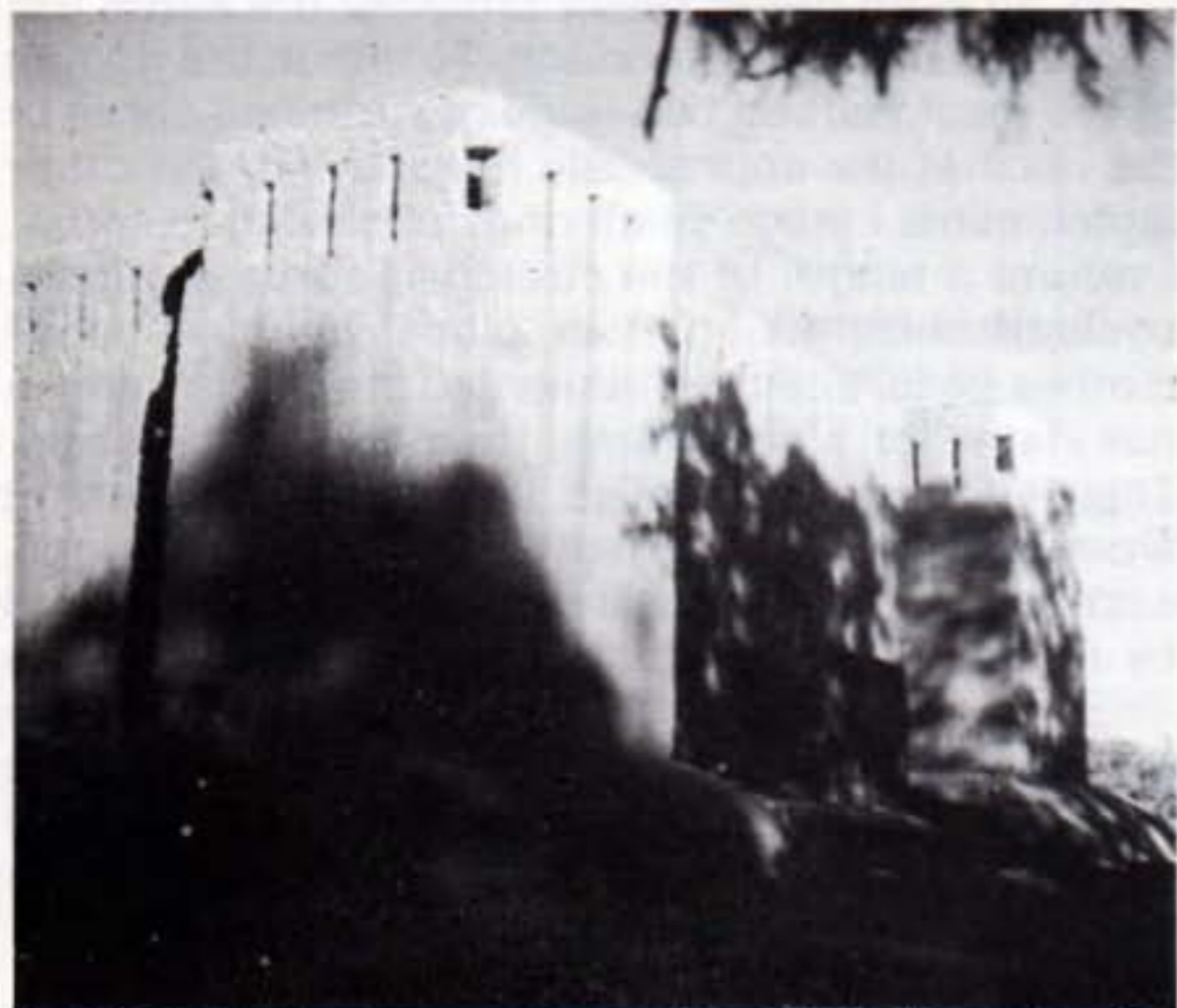
shade, for forts in the Sahara had to be built beside some form of water supply. This means mounting the model on a baseboard, which will enable us to increase the fortifications by adding a dry ditch round the fort.

Apart from 2, these are minor details, and an attractive fort can be easily and cheaply made with very little conversion work, but there remains one major fault, common to all these kits: there is no inner face to the fortifications.

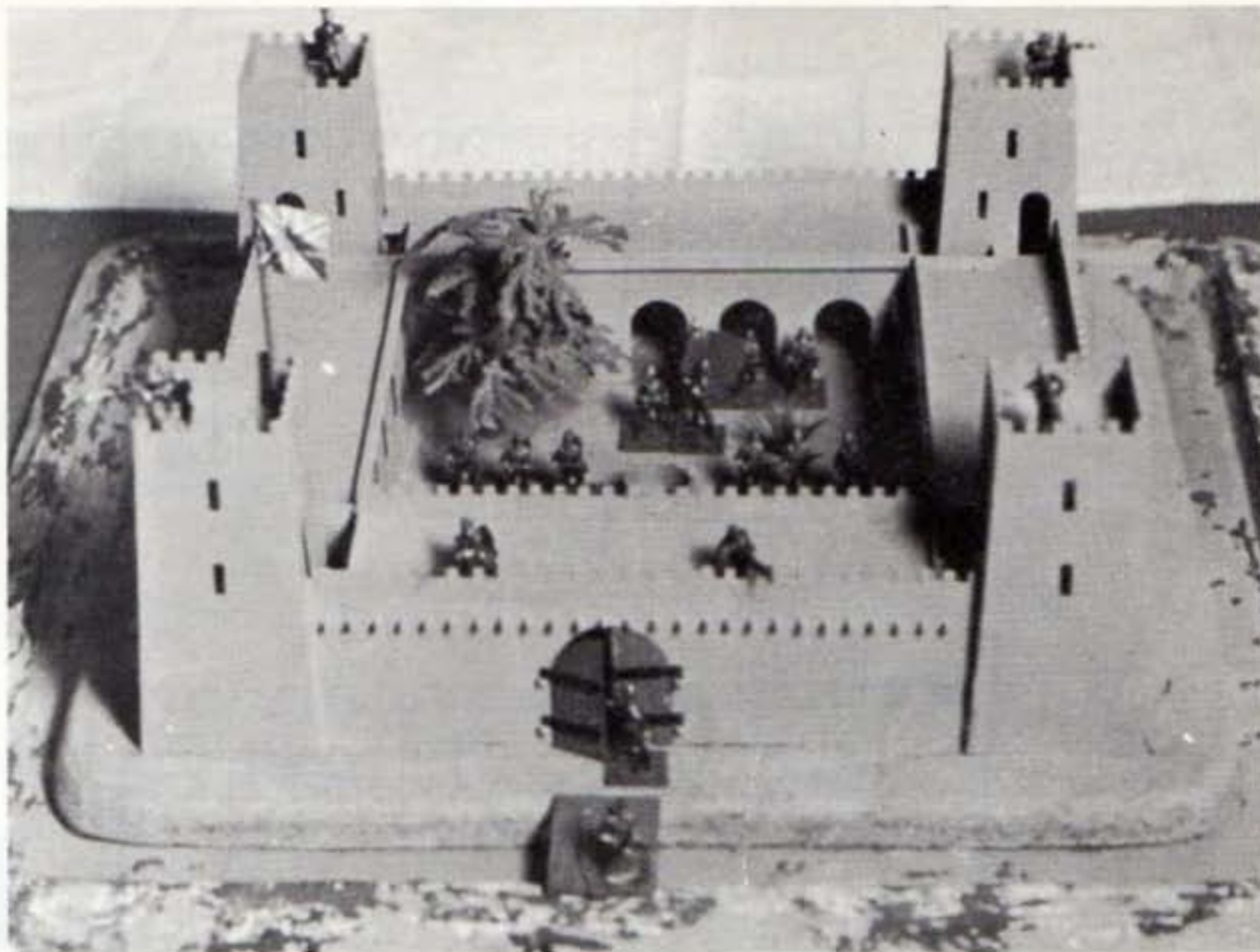
Artillery was not involved in the Foreign Legion's campaigns in the Sahara and therefore there was no need for thick walls, but generally the walls were thick enough to provide a walk along their tops, usually several feet wide, in addition to a parapet of not less than two feet wide. However, many forts had the width of their walls extended by the flat roofs of the rooms built onto the walls.

Until now it has been assumed that any conversion work will simply produce a bigger and better Foreign Legion fort, but there was no difference between the forts of the Legion and those of the other French colonial forces — the *Infanterie de la Marine* and the *African Light Infantry*. Taking this a step further, the kit is also suitable for the forts of other colonial wars, and is especially suitable for

Below left *Tamanrasset Fort in the Sahara. Note the use of a dry moat and rifle slits rather than embrasures and merlons.* **Below right** *Fort Pacot in the Sahara, showing good detail of the interior. Note especially the width of the ramparts.* Both these photos show the marginal difference in height between walls and towers (both photographs reproduced by kind permission of Lord Norwich).



A view of the completed model, being used as a British colonial fort of the late 19th Century. The line drawings illustrate all the modifications to kit parts.



the North West Frontier. This opens up a wide range of uses for the wargamer in the colonial period. Of course, with those tall towers and battlements the medievalists need not feel left out, and come to think of it, those towers have a distinctly Assyrian appearance . . . !

Most small frontier forts built by the various colonial powers in the 19th Century appear as individual fortifications, with scarcely two alike, yet all apparently following some basic principles of fortification. This is probably because most 19th Century officers had some degree of training in engineering. They may have been given some guidelines when sent to establish a fort, or construction may have been left entirely to the commanding officer's discretion. Either way, construction had to be governed by the (usually) limited materials and labour available: probably the main reason for the towers being little higher than the walls.

These forts were usually square or nearly so. The square plan was regarded as ideal because rooms could be built on all four sides yet still leave a large courtyard. Oblong plans were normally used only for small forts.

Sometimes a single tower served as a lookout post and perhaps as the control post when the fort was under attack: more often there was a tower at each corner to provide flanking fire along the curtain walls, for these forts were, in fact, direct descendants of the medieval keep.

The walls were built of rubble, strengthened with tree trunks and thickly coated with mud — two lesser reasons for building a fort beside an oasis. The old slaving and trading forts of the east and west coasts of Africa, the first of which were started in 1692, were finished off with a coat of lime plaster to

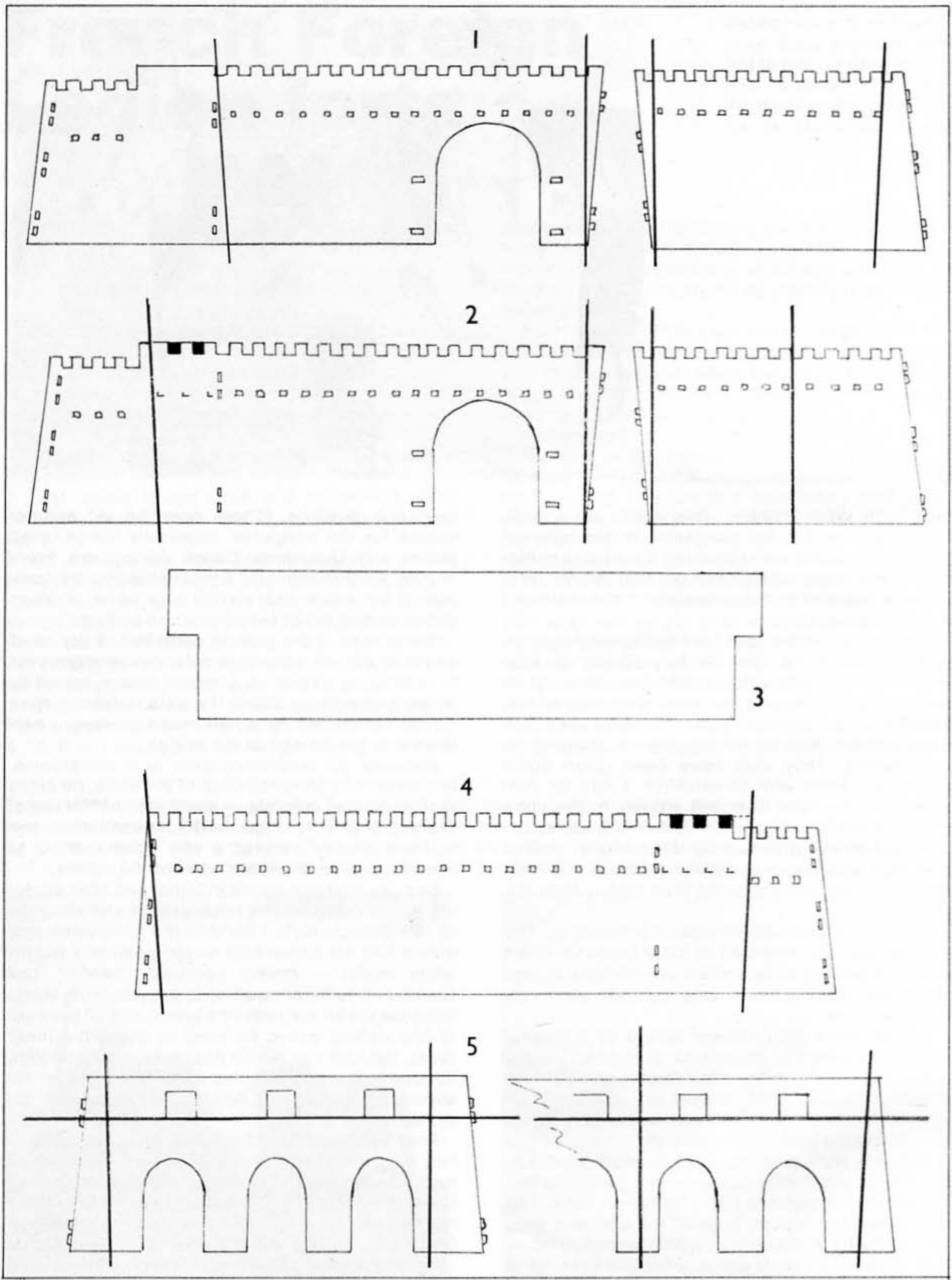
keep out moisture. (These open up yet another sphere for the wargamer, especially the skirmish player, with Dutchmen, Danes, Portuguese, Frenchmen, Englishmen and Brandenburgers all competing for trade and slaves, and none of them above getting rid of the opposition by force!)

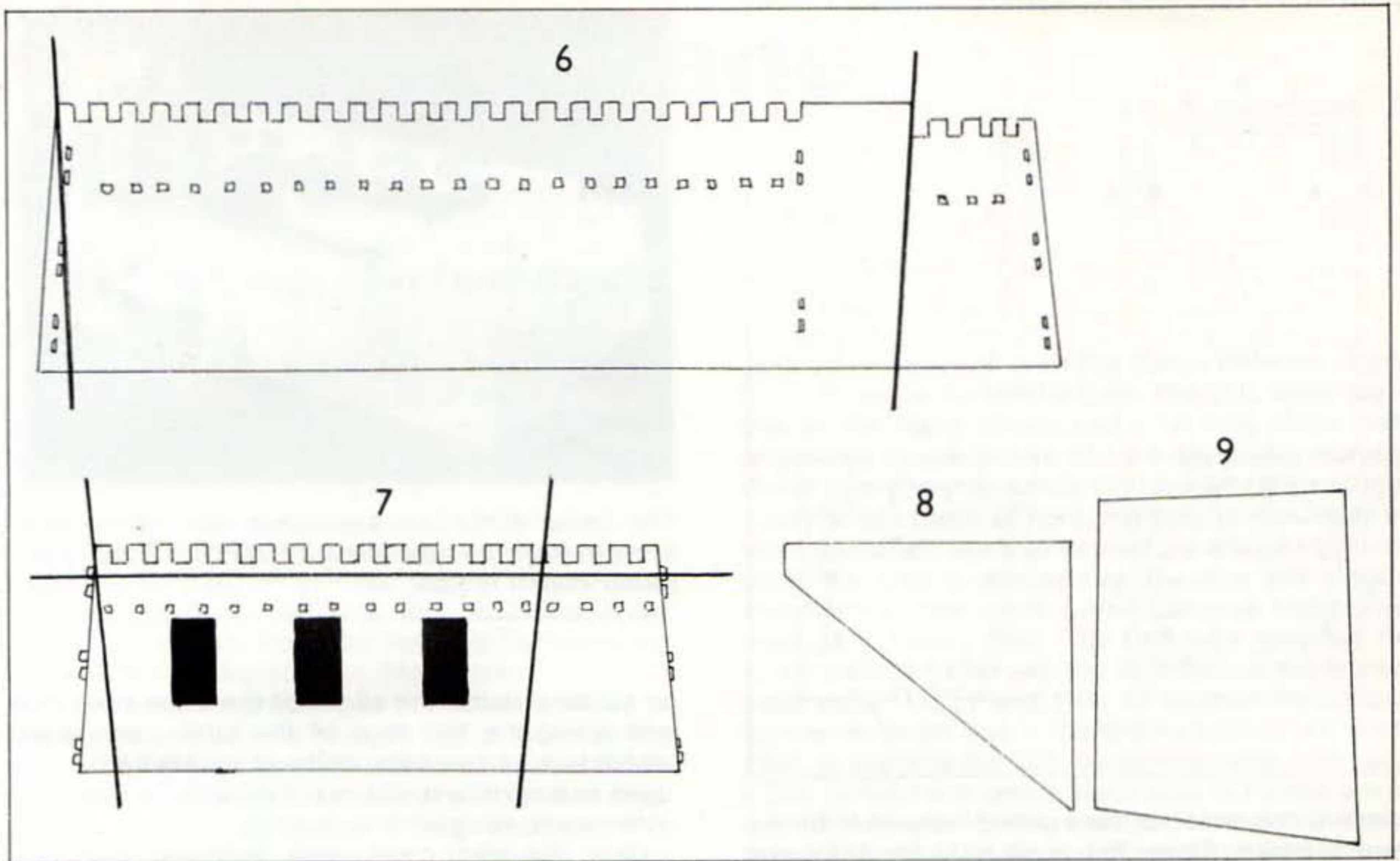
Sometimes, if the ground permitted, a dry moat might be dug, and the gate defences strengthened by restricting access via a narrow bridge, raised by ropes and pulleys. Often the gate defences were further reinforced by a half moon or ravelin earthwork at the far end of the bridge.

Because all accommodation and storerooms, etc, were built on to the back of the walls, no cross ventilation was possible — and this in hot climates. Therefore, to obtain the maximum ventilation, the builders usually adopted a very open method of construction for the inner walls of the rooms.

Bearing all these points in mind, and after studying the kit potential and photographs and etchings of 19th Century forts, I came to the conclusion that only a four kit conversion would provide a worthwhile model — mainly because I needed four towers and sufficient walling to provide inner faces. Because the kit has only one tower, and 50 per cent of the walling would be used to make the inner faces, the four kits would not make a huge model, but one measuring just over a foot square; ideal for almost all wargaming tables and convenient for storage.

Four kits might sound extravagant to some but in fact the final cost is less than a third the price of ready-made forts in the shops, and you have all the fun of the modelling! It is a cheap way for the young modeller to make his own fort, or for a modelling Dad to make one for his son for Christmas, or indeed for himself! However, not everyone will want





to buy four kits, and I have therefore included three alternative conversions:

A A two-kit conversion with the gate guarded by two flanking towers. Parts as indicated by the numbers. The gate would not be central in this model but there is only minor alteration to parts.

B Another two-kit conversion with the two towers united to make one large one, the entrance passing through its lower level. This idea has the disadvantage of leaving very little courtyard space. The arch sections of the Parts 1 are used to back the front wall, otherwise there is little alteration of parts once the tower is made.

C A three-kit conversion, with a Part 4 split between the two sides. Again very little alteration to parts.

D The four-kit conversion described in full below. This is easy and provides a good fort, but it is wasteful — eight pieces of walling being left over. Unfortunately this wastage is unavoidable. However, these parts can be quickly made into a smaller, oblong outpost with thinner walls and no tower. (Many forts had a maximum width of 80 feet or less and garrisons of only 20 to 25 men.) Make up as kit but in this order: 3 onto 1, add 4, insert 6, add 2 then 5. Cut the remaining Part 5 in half and cut new angles at all four edges to provide walling in place of the tower. The remaining Part 1, Part 3 and the off-cuts from the main fort conversion will provide inner faces for the walls if desired: keep these walls to single rampart width so as to clear the arches of the accommodation area.

Conversion D

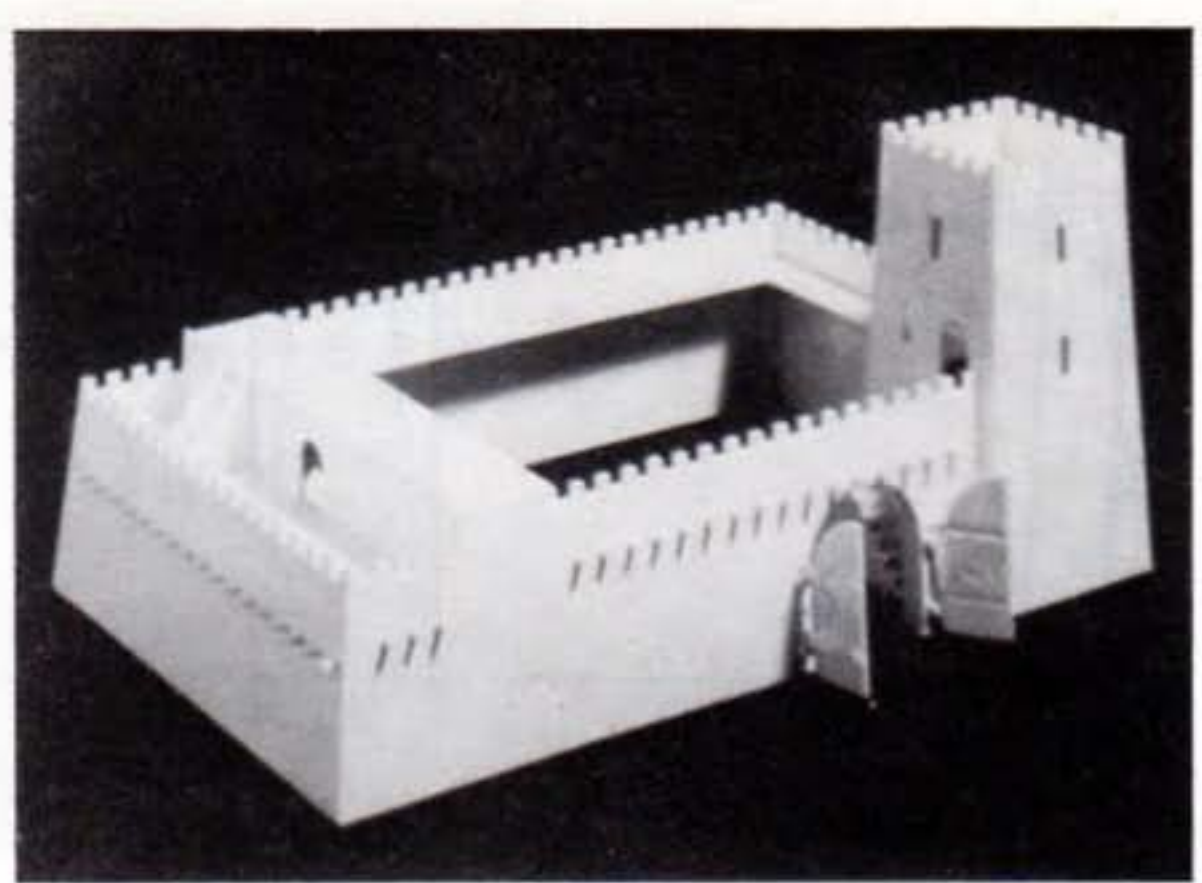
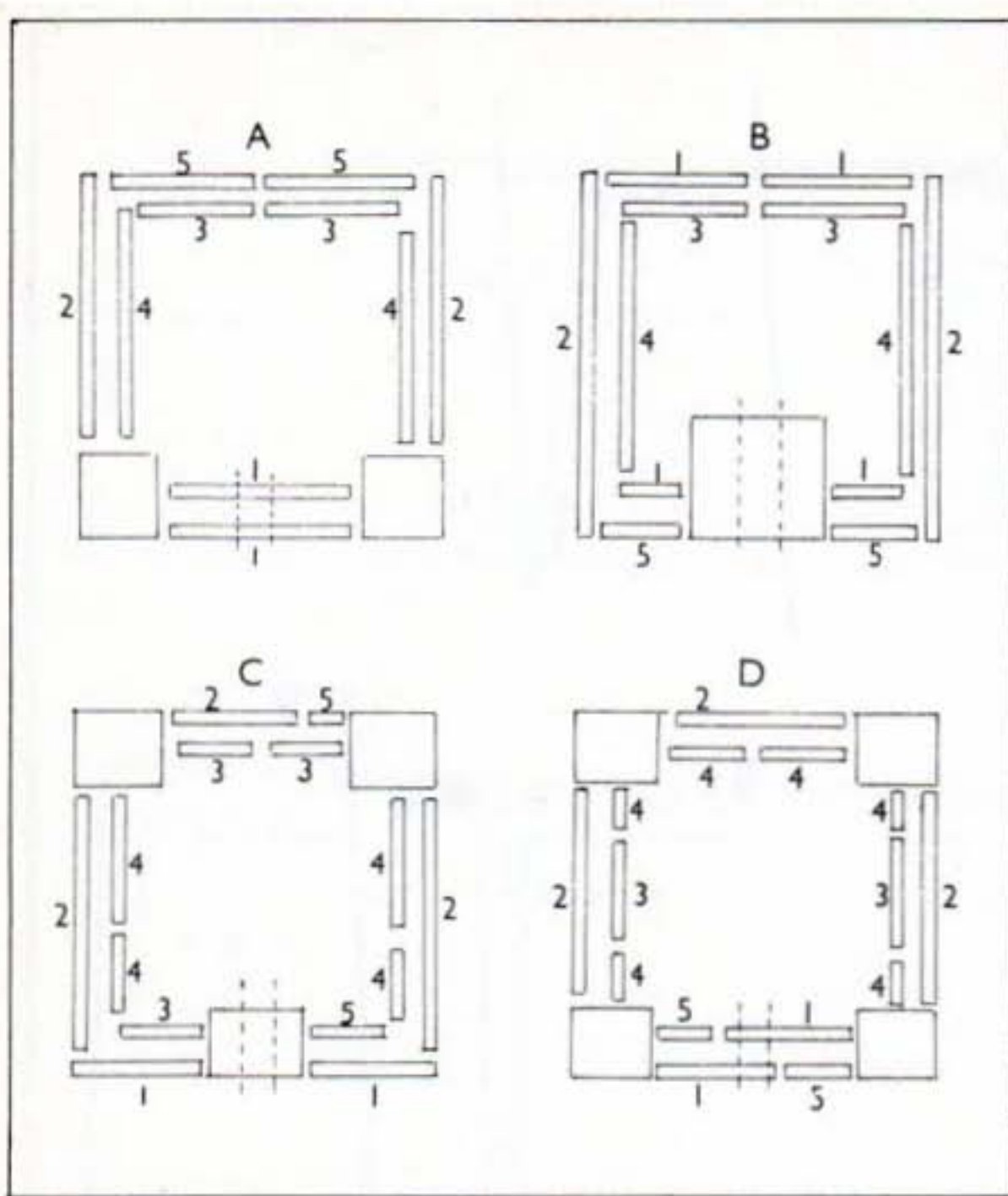
To save repetition it will be assumed that as we construct the model all flash and mould marks are cleaned off, all joints made perfect, and any cracks filled with body putty and smoothed ready for painting. Similarly, it is assumed that any locating ribs on the reverse of pieces being altered will be removed if they are in the way or become exposed. Unlike my usual break-up-and-stow-away models, this is a permanent model and all parts are cemented together. (The completed fort is small enough to go inside a plastic bag for dust-free storage, perhaps on/in the top of a wardrobe or a similar lurking place.)

Make up the four towers, three of them with Part 11 upside down as only one flag pole will be used and the other holes are filled.

Front wall outer Cut a Part 1 and Part 5 as Fig 1. (All measurements from these figures should be doubled to give the actual measurements for the model.) Remove extreme right hand beam-end on Part 5. Cement vertical edges together, making gate almost central. Cement a tower to each end. (The disadvantage of a one-tower kit is that there are no right and left-hand towers. Before adding walls, therefore, each tower should be turned so that its steps are on the two inner faces.)

Front wall inner Cut a Part 1 and Part 5 as Fig 2 and cement as before, adding three beam-ends from a Part 3 to the left end. Cement ends flush with the edge of the steps at the rear of the towers.

Cut four pieces of 40 thou card as Fig 3 and



The basic Airfix kit assembled as instructions, straight from the box. It is authentic but small, a toy rather than a model.

cement one on top of the existing rampart to form a new rampart. (Note: this is all right for Airfix and OO figures but if using 25 mm figures the addition of a new rampart makes the parapets too low. Either cement a strip between the existing ramparts or, better by far, remove them with a saw and insert a panel as Fig 3 at a more correct level.)

Between the arches of the gateway add two panels of 10 thou card, each 58 mm long by 35 mm wide. Cement to the inner side of the arches, meeting at the top.

Rear wall outer Cut a Part 2 as Fig 4. Remove the fragment of battlement at the right end and insert a piece of scrap to complete the run of merlons. Add four beam-ends, again cut from a Part 3. Cement between remaining two towers.

Rear wall inner Cut two Parts 4 as Fig 5 and cement vertical edges together. Cement between rear edges of steps. Add new rampart, as Fig 3, the inner edge fitting on top of the new inner wall. This rear unit houses the stores and stables.

Both sides Both outer faces are a Part 2, cut as Fig 6. Cement between towers of front and rear units.

Each of the two inner faces is made from a Part 3 and two arches from a Part 4. Cut remaining beam-ends off the Parts 3 and alter as Fig 7. Use a Part 4 and the left-over arch from the Part 4 already partly used, to provide four arches, each of these four sections being reduced to 48 mm high by 36 mm wide, with the arch central. Cement an arch to each end of the abbreviated Part 3 and cement flush with rear edges of towers. Finish off with the remaining two rampart panels, as Fig 3.

Cut 4 mm wide strips from a Part 6 and use these

as curbing round the edges of the steps openings and along the top edge of the three inner walls which lack battlements. Strips of square balsa were used as a cornice to conceal the joints between the inner walls, rampart and curbing.

Only the steps now need finishing. Cut four pieces of 40 thou card as Fig 8 and cement into the small gaps at the sides of the top halves of the steps, working from beneath the model. Cut four more as Fig 9 and cement at the sides of the bottom halves of the steps. Add a flag pole in one tower.

Bases Further work on the model is optional, both or one of the bases being omitted as preferred. The first base is half inch chipboard, 15 inches square with rounded corners. This provides a good textured surface. The fort was glued to this base with Evostik. The central well is a piece of 25 mm diameter plastic pipe, 12 mm high, cut to resemble stonework. A small hole was drilled to receive a tree; the other 'plant', taken from aquarium material, was glued on.

The larger base, which was kept separate to allow easier storage, is quarter inch ply, 20 inches square, again with rounded corners. A one inch dry moat is allowed, then scrap timber used to raise the inner face of the moat to the level of the chipboard. This timber is roughly chamfered down to the outer edge, and the whole smeared with Polyfilla to give a better finish. The bridge is a piece of 40 thou card faced with plank-embossed card, 45 mm long by 34 mm wide.

Airfix paints were used: a mixture of M9 and M15 as the basic colour, with 'rock outcrops', visible in the moat, picked out in khaki. Wooden parts were also painted pale khaki, streaked with an almost dry brush, and the iron work on the gates was painted with matt black. The same black was used, wiped on and off again, to mark the crevices in the stonework round the well.