

Malt Lane Development: Summary of Archaeology Report

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BISHOP'S
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Photo of the dig underway, with trenches marked out. Photo courtesy of Stephen Moyne, 20/20 Aviation.

Introduction

As most of you will know, the archaeologists moved into BW in November 2020 to carry out test trenches in advance of the latest planning application for the Malt Lane site (now submitted as 21/00359/FUL). This is a summary of the information found by the Southampton Archaeology Unit during and after the dig, written up by Peter Girdwood-Carroll and Andy Russel. The full report can be found on the WCC planning site as ARCHAEOLOGY_REPORT-3472185. The site includes all the land bounded by Winchester Road, Malt Lane, the River of the Lord to the corner of the housing development at Brook Street and then following the wall to the back of Town House to the road, so it includes the Youth Hall, the Scout Hut and Fox's.

History of the site through maps

The maps from c. 1785 show the site as open and unbuilt on except for two outbuildings at the back of Town House. The first real development on the site is Wych Elm, a very late 19thC house with occupies most of the plot. By 1968, the maps show the clinic and a garage being built, the latter being replaced by Fox's.

The trenches

The trenches were deliberately placed to investigate Wych Elms, the possible line of the River of the Lord, fuel tanks, public toilets, and vacant land on the site.

Trench 1 (Behind Town House):

This has evidence for a cellar, around 2.5m long. One wall had been removed but the eastern wall was made of chalk blocks and flint rubble. There may be the edge of a doorway. The floor of the cellar was ceramic floor tiles. On the floor was found two pieces of architectural stone – one a section of architrave, the other part of a pilaster capital. Both had been mortared into a wall as rubble at sometime, but retrieved and placed there later as part of the cellar backfill. The stone may well have come from the greensand quarries on the Isle of Wight (recorded in 1388 and 1400s).

Another wall to the east was built of limestone blocks with occasional plain brick [similar to the front of the museum].

There had been some digging out and refilling in this area, so there was a number of finds including Blanchard bricks, but also a clay pipe of the early 18thC. On top of these was a drain made of bricks with a slate top.

Close to Town House was a brick wall made up with a range of bricks [some reclaimed?]. The trench sides started to collapse [remember all that rain?] so the bottom of the wall was never found, but it was at least 1.5m deep. Up against it was a lot of loose fill with 18-19thC pottery so it may well have been the original line of the River of the Lord, backfilled with rubbish.

Trench 2: (Brook Street yard):

This had a large cut in it, at least 3m wide, with waterlogging at the base – probably the original line of the River of the Lord again, but no brickwork was found. It was not fully excavated at the sides were falling in. One posthole was also found, i.e. a hole for a post, and therefore a structure, but in this case interpreted as a fence post to stop animals falling in. Both thought to be Anglo-Norman [around the time of the Norman Conquest] but nothing conclusive.

Above the cut which was filled in was a wall going E-W with later bricks and occasional chalk blocks.

Trench 3 (Winchester Road west):

Two Anglo-Norman post holes were found at the east end. In the soil that filled them were prehistoric flakes, Roman brick and pottery fragments, late Saxon cooking pot fragments and food debris. In another layer was more Anglo-Norman pottery and food debris (burnt bones).

In the centre of the trench was a burnt area, possibly a hearth. In the layer above the floor there was charcoal, tiles fragments (possibly from the Bishop Wykeham's tile works), late Saxon and medieval pottery and fish bones. In another layer above that (possibly another floor made of rammed chalk) there were more tile and bone found.

Trench 4: (Winchester Road east):

Another post hole was found west of centre (Anglo Norman again). A much larger, square-ish pit was found at the eastern end at least 1.7m long. In it was found flint tools, loose Roman bricks and flooring, part of a belt and Anglo-Norman pottery. The pottery is mostly for cooking and goes with the eight different types of animal bone also found [but let's hope they didn't eat the cat and rats].

They also found the brick wall of the public toilet!

Trench 5:

West of the centre was a pit approximately 1m wide and rectangular side to a rounded base. It had more bones and a late Saxon cooking pot so Anglo Norman again.

A 2m section of brick wall was found which is interpreted as foundations of Wych Elms as the bricks are modern sized [but they are not Blanchard bricks, and the bond is irregular which is odd for such a recent wall...]. The wall was chopped off by a big pit of unknown size that had modern scrap metal in it.

Trench 6, down the west side of Fox's:

Four post holes were found in this narrow trench. The backfill included bones, flint tools and fragments of Roman brick. No definite dating though.

Trench 7, down the side of the Scout Hut:

A big pit was found in the middle of the trench, approx. 1.7m wide. Interpreted as Anglo-Norman again, and the archaeologists are noting that slag is present in small amount in the areas they think are Anglo-Norman. It is not the normal smithing or smelting slag so unusual. The layer above had "abundant" post medieval brick and tile including a bit of Roman brick.

Trench 8, in the car park:

Yet another post hole was found, but only charcoal in it. And another big pit, this time around 2.7m long and rectangular with steep sides (base not found because a modern sewer needed supporting! Both these are thought to be Anglo Norman. The bottom layer had nothing dateable in it, but a thick layer above it contained some medieval pottery, bones and roof slate.

Trench 9, between the Youth Hall and the car park:

No archaeology was found in this trench, the whole thing was disturbed down to 1.2m and had the sewers going through it.

Trench 10:

Four more post holes were found in the trench – a little slag in one leads to an Anglo Norman date. However, there were also a group of features for another structure. This one had two post holes and a beam slot [if you cut a slot for a timber to lie down in, that would be a beam slot. Usually interpreted as the base for a timber wall]. Mesolithic flints were found in the backfill, but the rest are interpreted as Anglo Norman and two phases of buildings.

A flint wall was built above these postholes, and incorporated a few fragments of late medieval or early post medieval brick. More sewers!

So to summarise the early periods:

Prehistoric:

Flints were only found in the south west of the site but they were nearly always found with later objects. Many of them were "blades" [long, thin tools] or "bladelets" which are interpreted as Mesolithic and fits in nicely with what was found under the Palace stables/ Sainsbury's. That site also had Mesolithic features which this site lacks [so far].

Roman:

Just one piece of Roman pottery, c.350-450 AD, but quite a few fragments of building material. So it seems there is Roman nearby [e.g. Coppice Hill], but not here. [Roman bricks and tiles are frequently reused e.g. Titchfield Church].

Anglo-Norman:

There are certainly timber buildings in the area, and after the posts rot and get removed the soil around them falls in with anything lying around. From this, and what look specifically like rubbish pits [no bin men, so you dug a hole and hid it – right up to the 19thC], we know that people are living here. They are cooking as there are animal bones, burnt grains, a hearth and cooking pots. The bones regularly include fish so it is likely to be an ecclesiastical area.

A few sherds of pottery are early and should really be described as Middle to late Saxon [Hamwic]. However, the most common is certainly the everyday “coarseware”, likely to be just post Conquest, and includes a bowl with holes from Trench 4 that has no local parallel. One piece of French pottery was identified, and parts of really large, decorated “tripod pitcher”.

The interpretation is that it tallies with that found under the Palace Stables. This area has less substantial buildings and they may probably be later, functioning as part of the Outer Court of the Palace. Iron working and crop processing were taking place nearby [both essential for a large estate]. The original line of the River of the Lord was found but no evidence for it being defensive.

Medieval:

This seems pretty quiet – as the report says: *“Despite the building accounts recording the presence in the outer court of various barns, stables, a gatehouse, and chambers looking onto the town, there was little evidence of high and late Medieval activity ... although a chalk floor suggests at least one building was located on the south edge of the site”* (2021: 60).

Only a few fragments of pottery were found from the medieval period.

Post Medieval:

Very quiet, however, the archaeologist point to the layers of flint cobbles around the site and suggest that perhaps the areas was a builder’s yard recycling materials from the Palace for sale. Other buildings arrived in the 19thC and were still there until the road widening of the 1960s.

And the proposed development? The report’s conclusion:

All the 19th and 20thC buildings appear to have insubstantial footings which have not destroyed the archaeology, however the earlier cellar might have done so.

There is around 0.5 to 1m of modern or disturbed soil over the site. Below that is the Anglo Norman evidence similar to that under the Palace stables/ Sainbury’s. The effect of the development on that archaeology will depend on the foundations, soakaways and excavation for “undercroft parking”.

Reference:

Girdwood-Caroll, P and Russel, AD. 2021. *Southampton Archaeology Unit Interim Report 1440: Report on an archaeological evaluation at Malt Lane, Bishop’s Waltham, Hampshire*. Southampton City Council.