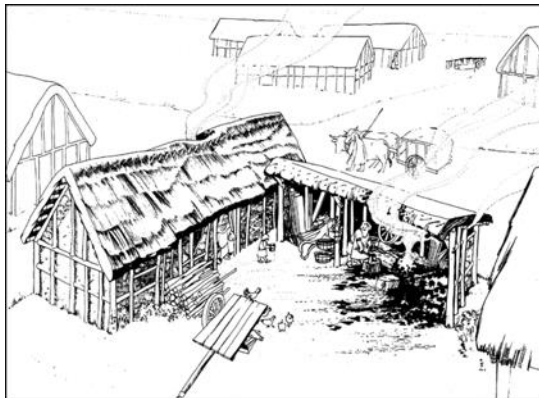


## Report on SAS talk April 2022

### Matt Garner – Combs, Coins and Crucibles: trade and production in Saxon Hamwic

Matt has worked on many sites in Hamwic since 1979, when he volunteered at the Six Dials excavation as a student. This talk draws on his experience and knowledge over the years, together with revelations from recent research.

The settlement of Hamwic flourished between the years ~650 and 850 AD on the west bank of the River Itchen: the waterfront was relatively limited, but much of the land nearby was low-lying and at risk of flooding. The Six Dials excavation during the 1970s and '80s was the largest site within the area of Hamwic, with numerous Middle Saxon features: mainly pits



and post-holes (with nothing remaining above ground level). Many features were not explored in areas not threatened by building, so there are gaps in our knowledge about occupation of the area. Artistic impressions of the Saxon town show a main street twenty metres wide, lined with Saxon houses, and a smithy on almost every street corner (Artist John Hodgson, 1987, who also produced a booklet *Hamwic, Southampton's Saxon Town*, illustrating some of the finds).

*Reconstruction of blacksmith's forge, Hamwic SOU 31.  
Artist: John Hodgson 1987.*

Most of the finds came from pits which were used for rubbish disposal. Once the site was abandoned the land returned to fields, and the upper layers would have been destroyed by medieval ploughing. And most items found by archaeologists would have been discarded or lost by their Saxon owners. However, a lot of evidence for production and craft survived, and in Hamwic it is found generally distributed, not confined to special areas for each craft.

### Organic remains

Plant remains survive as charred or mineralised grains, or waterlogged wood which might be buckets, well-shafts, casks or barrels, occasionally used as the base of a well. There is little evidence of crafts such as basketry, carpentry, cooperage (buckets, barrels) or textiles: wool, flax (linen) or hemp.

Animal remains – skeletal elements survive well but little leather has survived, though many pits showed signs of burning, which could result from smoking of hides to preserve them. Evidence for production includes butchery (cut-marked bones); hide (leather); and wool (weaving).

*Bone objects used with textiles: needle, decorated handle, spindle whorls & bone points (St Mary's Stadium).*

*Photo: Wessex Archaeology*



Some bone objects have been found (see above right), including points such as pins or needles; combs; decorated handles eg for knives; a decorated bone plaque and other

fragments, possibly from an inlaid casket. One unusual item was the vertebra of a whale which had been utilised as a chopping block (research from van den Hurk *et al*, 2022).

### **Industries**

**Textile working:** evidence found in the form of bone spindle whorls, loom weights – an abandoned loom in one house was indicated by a line of weights lying in place (see Hodgson 1987, with image of women working at a loom). Other textile-related artefacts included ‘fabric smoothers’ typically made from glass or bone (eg head of cattle femur) which showed wear and many scratches.

**Iron smithing** – smithies were often located at road junctions, and production seemed to be mostly domestic metal objects such as knives, iron bands for buckets and barrels, cauldrons for cooking etc. At St Mary’s Stadium site, excavated by Wessex Archaeology early in this century, they found evidence of weapons dating to the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. Data from Hamwic has shown that smiths in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries used decarburization of molten cast iron to make steel, comparable to the quality obtained in the 1740s - waste in the form of hammer-scale was analysed by high speed film and electron microscopy. (*Journal of the Historical Metallurgy Society 34, 2000*).



**Non-ferrous metals** – moulds for various objects have been found, such as rings and ingots; evidence for gold working includes touchstones and a mortar with traces of gold and mercury. Crucibles were used to melt silver and copper-alloys.

*Touchstone used in gold-working, stone probably imported.  
Photo: Matt Garner*

**Comb production** – Ian Riddler has written about the site of Chapel Road east (SOU 14, 1973): “Structures 1 and 2 were clearly used as sites for the production of handled combs and other objects made largely of bone”. Waste fragments (1650) included cattle, horse, a few sheep/goats, and red deer.



*Double-sided comb with fat teeth from Hamwic; handle broken.  
Photo: Ian Riddler*

**Glass working, pottery** – a pot apparently used as a crucible, and glass fragments. Also locally made pottery although no evidence of kilns has been found (possibly because they used clamp-kilns). Dies of bone or antler were used for stamped decoration of pottery.

**Stone/mineral working** – fragments of quern; lamps made from limestone; and whetstones have been found.

### **Trade in Hamwic**

The suffix *-wic* signified ‘trading place’; other examples include Lundenwic and Gipeswic (Ipswich), which were comparable to Hamwic in size. It’s not certain whether artefacts

made in Hamwic were used in trade (for comparison, wool and cloth were the chief exports of medieval Southampton).

### **Imports by materials**

Animal – green turtle, cowrie shell, ivory, peacocks, possibly whale-bone.

Stone/mineral - Quern: from Eifel in Rhineland, Germany; Whetstones: could originate in the West Country, France or Scandinavia; semi-precious stones eg garnet were often used in jewellery (eg pendants); imported wheel-thrown pottery, also decorated (local pottery is handmade).

Glass: it is thought glass vessels were imported as little evidence of glass working was found.

A comb with central handle from Chantry Hall: Ian Riddler (2015) commented that this type of comb is “more commonly found in northern Scandinavia and southern Germany”, and he suggested a 7<sup>th</sup> century date of production in Southern Germany.

Metals - for instance copper, silver, gold, lead, tin which can all be found in Britain. Iron probably came from Romsey, where there is contemporary evidence of iron-smelting.

Coins: 200+ have been discovered in Hamwic, 150+ of these were sceattas, including 80+ ‘Series H’ sceattas (types 39, 48 & 49). They are made with solid silver and of high value, yet many appear to have been lost.



*Series H sceatta (Hamwic) Type 49 – facing head & pecking bird (found Isle of Wight).  
Photo: PAS website*

### **End of Hamwic**

Archaeological evidence shows that Hamwic declined in mid-9<sup>th</sup> century AD, which is supported by documentary references to Vikings in England and Hamwic:

**789** ‘three ships of Northmen’ landed at Weymouth and killed the King’s reeve.

**793** ‘heathen men came and miserably destroyed God’s church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter’.

**840** ‘the Northmen ravaged Quentovic’ and then ‘crossed the sea and likewise plundered Hamwig and Nordhunnwig’.

*Report by S Hanna, with thanks to Matt for his advice.*