

Behind the Red Lion: excavations at the former fruit and vegetable market.

Speaker: Rachel Williams, project officer with Wessex Archaeology

This lecture on 11th October reported on excavations early in 2022, taking place directly behind the historic Red Lion pub/Indian restaurant fronting the High Street, Southampton; and Rachel also referred to excavations on other parts of this housing development. The site has been excavated in stages, as areas became available. A layer of brick earth lies 2m below street level, with floor surfaces above at ~1m (Fig 1).

Prior to excavating it was known that the late Saxon defensive Town ditch ran through this site, and a key aim was to find the ditch (which was identified on a nearby site); but demolition of an underground carpark on the site had destroyed much existing archaeology. The Saxon ditch proved the earliest feature identified, around 4m deep. Excavation was restricted to 1.2m by the developer, so any archaeology below this level will be preserved *in situ* for the future.



Fig 1. View of site showing depth of features: note stone-lined cess pit (L) and Saxon ditch (R).
Credit: Wessex Archaeology.

The Saxon ditch contained few finds but there was good stratigraphy, and the line of the medieval Town wall was visible in service trenches. This was cut by a later medieval pit containing several finds, and dating and environmental evidence was collected but has yet to be analysed. More medieval pits were located directly behind the Red Lion, producing limited amounts of pottery, one lined with oyster shells with some brick and charcoal.



Fig 2 View showing boundary wall, with the stone-lined cess pit and late Saxon ditch.
Photo: Matt Garner

The star features were two medieval cess pits found close to a boundary wall, which has been well-maintained over the centuries. The first was a stone-lined cess pit (Fig 2), partially excavated down to 2m, revealing well-preserved walls, a locally made 14th century cooking pot and smaller medieval items.

There was evidence that many later pits had been cut into the original pits, with deposits in upper levels of the site homogenised; but earlier stratigraphy became clearer as excavation progressed lower down. Medieval ditches aligned north/south were discovered, which would have been outside the Town wall on the edge of the fields; also post-medieval pits which contained re-deposited brick earth and stones, and in one area part of a structural wall remained.



Fig 3. Base of onion bottle, from cess pit 2.

Credit: Wessex Archaeology

The second cess pit was located to the north of the first with a more recent upper fill containing charcoal, and a concrete slab which topped the wall behind it, both of which were removed. The upper fills were post-medieval with lots of C17th onion bottles – probably from the pub (*Fig 3*). This cess pit was

squarer and less deep than the first. Flagstones were discovered on the edge of the plot.

After the initial excavation, photogrammetry was used to make digital 3-D models of these cess pits: this involves taking thousands of pictures to produce a detailed digital 3-D model of any structure, to enable accurate measurement. At present these models can only be viewed by the archaeologists because each photograph is recorded and charged individually to archive, which is expensive. It is hoped that this problem will be overcome before long.

The property boundary (*Fig 2*, above) runs across the middle of the site, with traces of a parallel wall to the east which could have been a passageway. Areas of medieval cobbles were revealed, and a 'dog leg' of wall, part of which has slumped into a pit (some of the wall had been robbed). Part of the site was used later for drainage, with a small possibly 17/18th century drain meeting another drain running east/west, perhaps discharging into the Town ditch. The remains of a Tap Room were found on the east of the site at Back of the Walls, as shown on the 1847 map of the old town. Footings of the walls were uncovered together with the base of a toilet, probably added at a later date, and cut through by the pub's modern cellar wall. Some of the larger stones used to build the back boundary wall may have originated from the town wall. Broken bottles were visible between them, and an audience member suggested the glass was inserted there possibly to deter rats from getting through the gaps between the stones. Further to the east of the site part of the former Canal was found, comprising the tow path and edge of the canal fill.

A selection of finds (not illustrated) included: a 14th century spur; medieval sandy ware cooking pot; Charles II/Queen Anne red-glazed jug; 17/18th century pipkin vessel; a selection

of 17th century onion bottles (*Fig 3*) and stem of a wine glass; 18th/19th century Lowlands and creamware pottery sherds, mainly blue and white.

On 10th October 2022 Wessex Archaeology returned to the site for another six weeks, and they hope this extended exploration may provide further clues about later phases of the site. Once archaeological work on the site is finished they will start on post-excavation analysis and the process of detailed interpretation, and it is hoped that publication of Wessex Archaeology's work on this site will shed light on previous discoveries, especially from the Saxon occupation. We hope to hear more of this site from Rachel in future.

Mandy Kesby