



Southampton Archaeology Society Study Day 8th June 2019

Life and Death in Medieval Southampton

From Wine Vaults to Water Houses: The buildings of medieval Southampton by Dr Andy Russel

Andy set the ball rolling with a comprehensive review of Southampton's medieval buildings, as well as a Late Saxon house excavated at West Quay, a wooden framed house with porch, the plan of which survived as postholes. Such buildings would have been typical before the Norman Conquest, and excavations in East Street indicate that poorer people continued to live in post-built wooden houses with beaten earth floors and open hearths. During the 12th century the Normans stamped their authority on Southampton by erecting a Castle over the site of many Saxon properties in the north-west quadrant, from stone imported from Caen in Normandy and from Quarr on the Isle of Wight. St Michael's Church and the Bargate were built in Quarr stone and it was used in the lower floors of modest houses such as the 12th century Medieval Merchant's House (58 French Street). Caen stone was preferred for quoins and door and window-frames in wealthier houses, which were roofed in Cornish slate with ceramic ridge tiles and finials. We know little about who built these houses, although names of the owners are known from the town records.

Remains of the Castle show neatly coursed walls, and an immense well-built garderobe from the 13th century, although the castle chapel built in 1180 does not survive apart from a carved corbel. The Castle vault was constructed beneath it to hold the 'King's Wine', a tax on imported wine: the King claimed 10% (one barrel in ten). This contrasts with the castle bailey walls where lower arches are all different shapes as they were buried in earth to the upper wall level, and with the early town walls which were put up piecemeal. Several of the merchants' houses opposite the quay were incorporated into the town wall after the French raid of 1338, and outlines of windows and doors can still be seen. By mid 14th century the

town walls were built up in military style with twenty-nine towers, such as Catchcold Tower with its three gun ports, and God's House Tower built to house the Town Gun and its gunner. The Bargate was enlarged with a fore-tower and Guildhall at the back, partly used as prison and magistrates' court.

God's House Hospital in the south east quadrant dates from the 1190s, which became a major landlord owning 30% of properties in the town. The Franciscan Friary in the same area dates from 1233, initially with houses attached but this land was later used as a burial ground. A unique set of floor tiles showing hunting scenes has been found there, indicative of the building's status. The Friary was responsible for the water supply out of the Rollesbrook stream, with the Water House (1366) surviving on Commercial Road. Most merchants' houses had plain floor tiles, and storage vaults were built below ground, from Purbeck stone supplied as ready-to-build packages, such as Quilter's Vault and vaults at 94/98 High Street. Later medieval buildings include the Wool House (1410); Market Hall (1427); and 'Tudor' House built by Sir John Dawtrey in 1480.

Living with Pottery in Medieval Southampton by Duncan Brown

Following on from Andy, Duncan told us about medieval pottery in Southampton which is grouped into into three periods: **Anglo-Norman** 1100 to 1250, when earlier locally made pots were unglazed and hand built. Turned and glazed imports came in from Normandy later on: 95% of pottery from all areas of Southampton comprised locally made cooking pots, with 5% imported wares. In the **High Medieval** period 1250 to 1370 local potters began to make wheel-thrown vessels when firing and glazing improved. Local decorated vessels copied imported forms, such as jugs introduced from Bordeaux and Saintonge, found mostly in the merchants' area. Local pottery still made up 79% with 21% imported wares, mainly jugs. By **Late Medieval** times, 1370 to 1510 trade with France declined due to the Hundred Years War, and trade developed with north-sea ports and the Low Countries. From late 14th century local pottery (45%) consisted of plain bowls, cooking pots with flat bottoms and pitchers, with limited use of glaze. Much more highly decorated and glazed tableware was imported from Italy, northern and south west France ('graffiti' styles and Saintonge chafing dishes) also Spain, and stoneware from the Rhineland (55% imported).

In the earlier periods pottery might be imported containing goods but would have little value in itself, but by late medieval times vessels would often be imported for specific uses. The Port Books for Southampton record low values for taxes on imported pottery vessels, in comparison with vessels of pewter or glass; and the taxes on contents such as "jars of mercury" show that its main value lies in the contents. A record of 1448 shows that highly Glazed pots were taxed at 1½d each, the same price as produce contained in wooden vessels.

Duncan observed that most pottery is found broken in rubbish pits and it's challenging to work out how it might be used in the home. Applying this to an early medieval merchant's house such as 58 French Street, he looked at each room to analyse where pottery might have been in use. One of the upstairs chambers was provided with its own 'garderobe'; but at this period any jug or pot might be used in the bedchamber as chamber pots were then unknown. Downstairs, the rear private room would be used for business matters, keeping accounts or household tasks e.g. sewing, as well as dining. Meals would be eaten from

wooden bowls, platters or trenchers which do not survive as archaeological evidence, and serving vessels were of metal, and glass for drinking. Cooking pots and storage jars would have been used in food preparation in the kitchen, usually a separate building to avoid the risk of fire. This might also contain pans for dripping (from roasting meat) or clay fire covers. The Hall was a public room with a central hearth in early medieval times and the stairs were also situated here. At the front of the property there would have been a shop where the shutters could be lowered to make a flat counter. Pottery could be used here for storage and display, and maybe for sale. Examples of pottery types might be Italian decorated majolica ware; Rhenish beer cruses; storage jars, or bottles containing items like mercury.

The Cloth Trade in Hampshire from 1390s to 1470s by Phoebe Merrick

Phoebe's talk reflected her in-depth knowledge of the woollen cloth trade at a particular period in Hampshire, and included details of the production of yarn and weaving techniques for different types of cloth. In the 14th century Hampshire broadcloth was exported widely to Europe and was popular especially with Italian merchants. The cloth was woven on a horizontal loom worked by two people generally in their own homes, working only in daylight with no artificial light. Broadcloth had a standard finished length of 28 yards long by 54 inches wide, which would take three weeks to produce. Some undyed cloth was exported to Italy, but most would be dyed with natural vegetable dyes set with mordant. The cloth would be shrunk by the process of fulling then stretched on a tenter, washed, dried, brushed and sheared several times, and pressed for delivery or for sale, when it would be taxed.

This tax was known as Ulnage, and the regulation of length and width became standardised to make tax calculation easier and to avoid disputes. From 1450 onwards, cloth had to be measured by the tax collector or 'ulnager' and any pieces not conforming were seized by the Crown; but this could be abused by the ulnager keeping the cloth and disrupting trade, so fines were imposed instead. Some towns had their own ulnager, and after 1394 ulnagers were appointed for each cloth-producing area. Between 1394 and 1403 seven ulnagers are recorded for Winchester, wealthy men of high status such as MPs, who would employ underlings to do the work. From 1403 the posts were combined, but in Hampshire it was held by two men (one for Winchester, one for the rest of the county), although Hampshire was not one of the principal cloth producing areas. There was a fixed rate of ulnage which was paid to the Exchequer but the ulnager kept anything extra they collected. Ulnage monies were officially used for specific purposes e.g. in Winchester it was allocated to the up-keep of the town walls and defences, but there is some doubt whether it was always used in the approved way. By the 15th century an ulnager could oversee several counties, and the collection was farmed out to individuals who would be sponsored to make a bid for an area, such as one John Walker who made a bid for the farm of Southampton.

The records indicate where cloth was received but not where it was produced, for instance records for 1394 show 187 cloths from Winchester, 89 from the Isle of Wight and 48 from Southampton. There are no records of individual weavers and others involved in producing cloth, only for those presenting it for sale, and the cloth trade fluctuated from year to year so many artisans would have had to undertake different work at times. Cloths might sell for as much as five or six shillings a yard, but artisans received only four pence a day. Finer cloth

required a considerable financial outlay, and production might be sub-contracted out. The methods of production changed over time, with smaller cloth lengths being introduced and known as dozens (about 12 yards), and kersey cloth which was narrower and shorter. In the later 15th century the system of local ulnagers was re-established but by 1466 cloth sales in Hampshire had declined and much of the Italian trade moved to London.



Phoebe brought a display of colourful samples of spun and dyed wools, which was popular with the audience – one member remarked that the subtle natural colours were much more attractive than modern chemical dyes.

Late Medieval Southampton and the Wooden World: changing ships and technology by Ian Friel

Ian Friel also imparted a great deal of knowledge of medieval shipping, although he pointed out our information is limited, because archaeological remains may be either impressions in mud (for instance Sutton Hoo ship burial) or bottoms buried in mud (such as Grace Dieu in the Hamble River). Few written records exist except of ships owned by the Crown, and medieval images of ships are stylised but can indicate structural trends. In northern Europe boats were clinker built using overlapping planks, the method used by the Vikings from the 9th century into the 1400s. Vessels were rigged with one mast using a square sail made originally from wool (later canvas) hanging from a yard. The rudder would be fastened to the side of the stern for steering, but by the 14th century a central rudder became widespread, which was less vulnerable to damage. In the 13th/14th century cogs ships were developed which were wider with a straight stem and stern posts and ideal for cargo transport. A second mast was later added for larger ships, to enable better manoeuvring. These were found as far south as Northern Spain and were copied by the Italians.

In southern Europe around the Mediterranean from 9th/10th century ships used skeleton construction with the keel and ribs laid down, to which planks were nailed edge to edge (carvel) and caulked to make them waterproof. A triangular lateen sail with a long lower yard enabled easier manoeuvring especially when sailing into the wind, and by the 13th

century ships could have up to three lateens depending on size; but side-mounted rudders continued in use up to the 15th century. In the 1270s the Genoese were still sending luxury items by galley direct to North Sea ports, but by late 14th century the cocha was developed in the Mediterranean, and later the carrack in southern Europe.

The late medieval English shipbuilding industry was weak and badly organised apart from a few established shipbuilding centres. The Master Shipwright who oversaw operations was paid reasonably well, but those at the bottom of the ladder were less well-off. Many others would be irregularly employed. Ships were mainly built of oak and when choosing living trees the shipwright would look for different cuts for elements of the ships. Tree trunks were used for planking, either split or sawn by hand, and the planks were trimmed with a side axe. Low status commercial shipping was plain but more decoration was required for the king's ships, needing carvers/carpenters.

Although King Alfred is credited with founding the English navy, when Henry V became king in 1413 he had only two or three ships. Three more ships were added after 1414, and the navy fought in 1415 at Harfleur, before Agincourt. By 1417 French power was broken, the English later occupying Paris. Four 'great ships' ships built for the Crown included the Grace Dieu 1400 tons, Trinity 540 tons, Holy Ghost 760 tons and Jesus 1000 tons. Most ships were less than 100 tons, so these were extremely large, taking up to 200 crew and 250 soldiers. The Grace Dieu was the largest ship built before the 16th century at 50-60m long, only 15m shorter than Victory. 3906 trees were used to build her, the majority oak, but also ash, beech and elm. The ship had three skins and an anchor 17ft long and 11.5ft wide.

Another ship used by the English for both war and trade was the clinker-built balinger, equipped with oars and sail for flexibility and speed (larger vessels might have two masts). One built in Southampton was named the Anne, and another, Little Jesus, was rebuilt on the Hamble. The carracks were found to leak and the king imported shipwrights to show how to build them, but by 1422 only two carracks were still in commission. Four ships patrolled from Southampton but in 1420 there was a mutiny of soldiers and by 1430 just one remained operational. In late medieval times the main, mizzen and foremast became standard on ships until the mid-19th century. Masts were made with a spindle which was faceted and then faced with planks on the outside; but Baltic pine was later imported for masts.



Members of the audience at the Study Day in St Joseph's Hall.

The Woman Falconer by Ian Riddler

Ian Riddler told the story of a carved bone knife handle found in 1972 beneath St Michael's House, Southampton, which had mistakenly been listed as a 'woman falconer'. This handle actually shows a medieval lady in a long gown with a veil hiding her hair, indicating her aristocratic status. This type of artefact belongs to a group of bone knife handles dated to the period between c1250 and 1350 from across Europe (~one hundred in total), some of which show either a man or a woman holding a falcon. Examples from England mainly show women: four with a standing woman, five women falconers and one male falconer. A knife from Coventry was found complete with scabbard and blade and appears to have been fashioned so that when sheathed the head would show above the scabbard. The imagery has been interpreted in terms of the symbols of courtly love, where the falcon symbolises male lust and the image of a woman holding a falcon indicates that she is in control.

The talk included details about the ancient sport of Falconry, which originated in the eastern steppes of Europe and was introduced into England about the 8th century, although the archaeological study of falconry in England began only twenty years ago. Evidence is based on finds of bones of falconry species sometimes buried with their owners' remains; bones of birds of prey, especially female birds in high status settlements; equipment such as sets of metal rings; and bones from prey species where other items connected with falconry exist. Contemporary illustrations may also provide documentary evidence for falconry, and there are records in Southampton indicating a trade in falconry birds from Scandinavia. Bones from goshawk and merlin have been found at West Gate, Southampton.

Disasters and Diseases in Medieval Southampton by Mary South

The day ended with Mary's talk about sickness and other natural or man-made disasters in medieval Southampton. Leprosy was commonplace in medieval times and like other large towns Southampton had a leprosy hospital located outside the town walls (now the area of Guildhall Square), known as the Hospital of St Mary Magdalene, with a large garden for growing food. The hospital maintenance was under the care of St Denys Priory but the Prior and often the King claimed farm produce from the hospital. People suffering from leprosy were compelled to ring a 'lazar bell' as the disease was thought to be spread by droplets from their breath. By the mid-14th century the hospital was run down, with no money being spent on the structure.

A series of natural disasters took place in the 13th and 14th centuries: a volcanic eruption on Lombok Island (1258) sent a dust cloud across the world and sparked the Little Ice Age, and led to a 4% drop in population including in Southampton. In the early 14th century a number of wet winters with much flooding destroyed crops and caused famine, and it was said that people ate horses, dogs and even their own children! Following the 1338 French Raid trade declined in Southampton and the town suffered from a loss of skilled trades. In 1347 St Denys Priory was relieved from paying their tithes due to loss of rents (and it was allowed to take the profits from St Mary Magdalene Hospital). The Black Death of 1348-49 possibly entered through Southampton's port, causing up to 70% death rates in some places from bubonic and pneumonic plague. In 1349 Holy Rood Church, Southampton appointed a new vicar in March, April and September; and a further outbreak occurred in 1604. No 'plague pits' have been identified in Southampton although quantities of bones were found in the 1800s when putting the railway line through the town.

Armies embarking or disembarking from the port brought diseases such as typhus which spread through human lice and rats, with an incubation period of five days and death within twelve days in the worst conditions. Evidence of smallpox has been found from Egypt since 1157 BC and it spread through Europe in the Middle Ages. Mortality rates were 25 to 30%, and if you survived it you would be immune, though there could be effects such as arthritis, blindness, or breathing problems. A lesser known infection was 'variola' (major and minor) which was almost always fatal. The skin was covered with blisters that joined together and lifted areas of skin away. The East Street 'stews' were known as a hotbed of disease and would be raided and fines levied when the town was short of money. In later medieval times a 'flu epidemic was recorded at Netley Abbey in 1556-59 when 50% of the population were infected. Influenza usually resulted in three weeks of illness with several months' recovery. The town was low lying and prone to flooding which meant it had mosquitoes which spread malaria.

Medieval medicine was fairly rudimentary and it was thought that the humours (earth, air, fire and water) needed to be balanced within the body to preserve health, and astronomy also astrology could be consulted. It was important to observe the patient with care, urine was examined and bloodletting practised, and plants used to alleviate specific symptoms, e.g. mallow used for enemas. This is also probably why St Mary Magdalene Hospital and high-status houses would have gardens to grow plants with healing properties, however those living in poor areas had little access to such remedies.

This was another successful Study Day with an excellent panel of speakers, all experts in their fields. I've done my best to summarise their main points but I can't hope to do justice to their breadth of knowledge and elegance of delivery. We are most grateful to Matt Garner for co-ordinating the day and to all those who helped with the organisation, to Mandy Kesby for the display of photos (and her comprehensive notes), and to several of our members who helped prepare and serve refreshments through the day.

During the lunch hour some of us joined a short tour of the nearby Medieval Merchant's House at 58 French Street, led by the English Heritage custodian, Fern Middleton. The house was restored in the 1980s and is open on Saturday and Sunday between April and October. It offers fascinating insights into medieval life in a merchant household in Southampton and is well worth a visit and guided tour.



View of back of house and bedchamber at 58 French Street, Southampton. (EH)