
EXCAVATIONS AT CHESTER

5-7 FOREGATE STREET 1991

THE CITY DITCHES

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THIS PROJECT IS GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY W H SMITH

**CHESTER
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Introduction

This site lay just outside the City Walls to the north of the Eastgate. Chester is famous for its medieval walls, which are the only complete circuit surviving in the country. The walls, however, were only part of a whole system of defence. This included the curtain wall, towers, gates and ditches.

Of these, only the wall and some towers still remain. The ditches gradually became filled in and were built over, and the medieval gates were all demolished in the 18th century to make way for wider entrances. So when W H Smith submitted plans to rebuild their store, including an extension to their basement across the area where we knew that the ditches lay, we decided that it was vital to carry out an excavation. W H Smith generously agreed to fund the dig. We finished the excavation just before Christmas.

At any one time, there was only one ditch in existence. However, through the course of time the ditch became infilled with soil and rubbish, and so it became necessary to dig a new one. Our knowledge of the history of Chester led us to expect a sequence of ditches of different periods on the site, and we were not disappointed. For the first time in Chester, we have now dug a slice across the whole sequence.

The Excavation

The Roman Ditches

The first Roman ditch was dug close to the walls as soon as the Roman army arrived in the 70s AD. At that time, there was no stone wall around the legionary fortress, only a turf and soil rampart.

Shortly after AD 100 this ditch was filled in and replaced by a larger one. Most of the first ditch

was destroyed by the later one and by a Victorian cellar which was dug into it. The new ditch may have been dug at the same time as the impressive stone wall was built at the front of the rampart.

These ditches had a sharp V-shaped profile, making it difficult for an attacker to climb in and out. The outer face was also plastered with clay to make escape even more difficult. Outside the ditch there was a patrol track. During its use the ditch was kept clean, probably by work-gangs of soldiers.

At some time, probably in the late Roman period, the ditch was filled in. The generally clean and uniform soil used as fill indicates that this was done deliberately over a short time span.

The Saxon Ditch

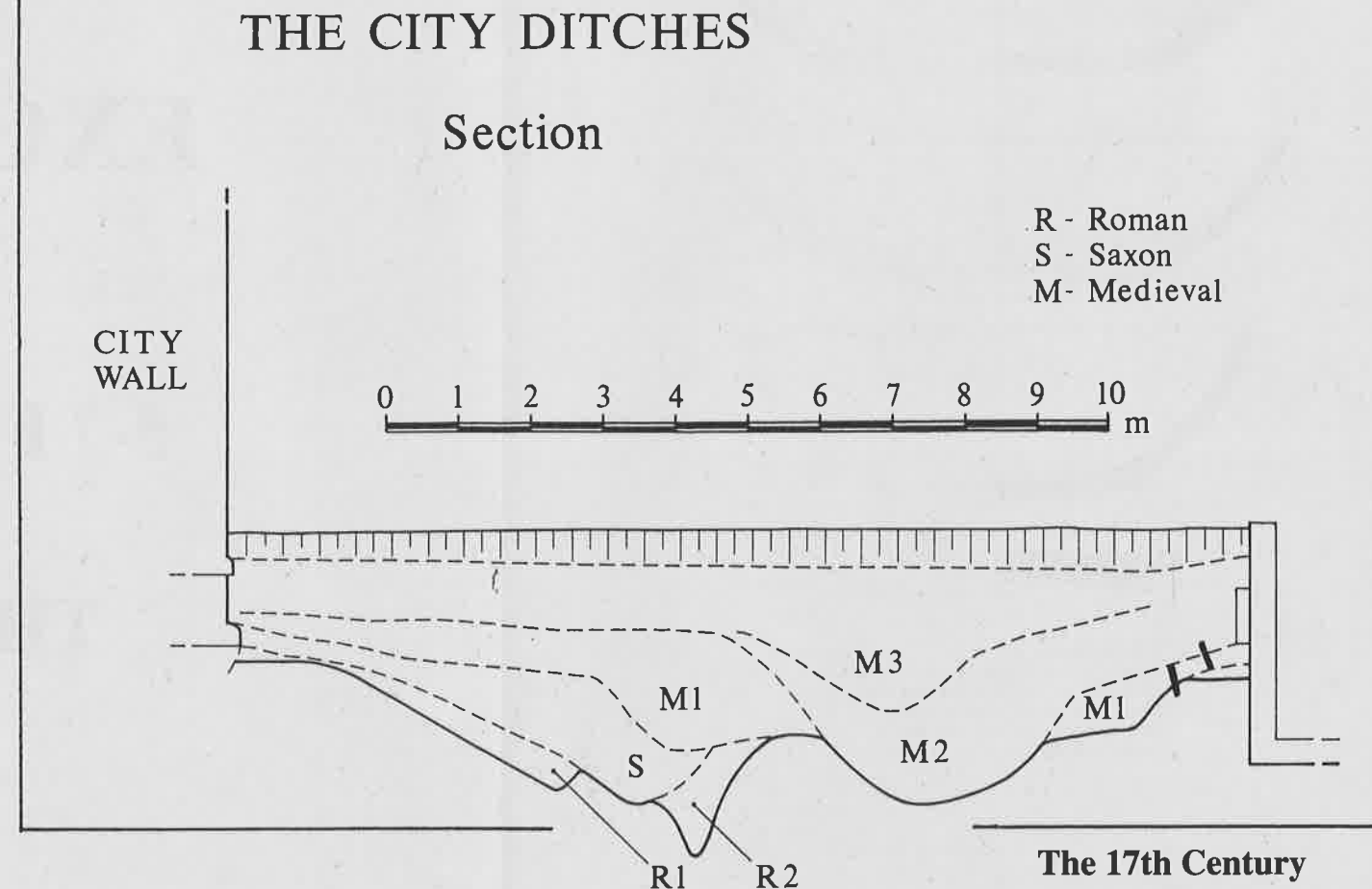
In AD 907 it is recorded that Chester was founded as a '*burh*', a defended settlement forming a refuge from the marauding Vikings. On this excavation for the first time, a ditch which we think might be from this fortification has been found. It was U-shaped and cut into the top of the Roman ditch.

Unfortunately, this was just the point at which the Victorian cellars had destroyed the early features, so we cannot be absolutely certain of this dating. This ditch was filled up with rubble from demolished Roman buildings.

The Medieval Ditches

The Medieval ditches were much more complicated because they were used as a rubbish dump over several centuries. They were dug further away from the Walls than the Roman ditch because the medieval towers projected forward, unlike the Roman ones which were built flush with the outer face of the Walls.

We think that there were probably two or three ditches dug after the Norman Conquest. The first ditch was wide and relatively shallow. It cut through two earlier pits, suggesting that the site was



already occupied when it was dug. No sooner had this ditch been dug than people started filling it with refuse. The broken pottery in this rubbish dates it to the 12th and 13th centuries.

After this first ditch became choked, a second one was dug, rather narrower but deeper than the first. Again it was filled with household refuse. The similarities between these ditch fills made it difficult to distinguish between the cuts for them. On the outer edge of these ditches lay the remains of three wooden fences. These had been put up one after the other as earlier ones slid into the ditch. This ditch too had filled up by the end of the 15th century.

The third ditch was a much more shallow and irregular affair than the earlier ones. It may not even have been a proper dug ditch at all. It could just have formed as the rubbish fills in the ditches beneath decayed and compressed.

The Rubbish Fills

The domestic rubbish in the ditches formed a black peaty waterlogged deposit. This proved to form an excellent environment for the preservation of organic material, which normally decays in the otherwise well-drained Chester soil. For example, several wooden bowls and a good number of leather shoe fragments were found. There was a good selection of pottery, too, including locally made and imported products. Quantities of the peaty fills were collected for sieving and microscopic analysis to find seeds, insects and small animal remains, all of which tell us about the lifestyle and living conditions of the medieval citizens of Chester.

The 17th Century and Later

By the 17th century the ditches had been filled for the last time. The site was divided between the backyards of buildings erected over the ditches up to the Eastgate. Significantly, there was no ditch here during the Civil War of 1642-6. During the Civil War, the suburbs along Foregate Street were protected by earthen outworks. When the suburbs were captured by Parliamentary forces, the buildings were mostly burnt down. Some mid-17th century deposits found on the site may date to this episode.

The next major event was the construction of buildings with deep cellars in the 19th century. These in turn were demolished during the 1960s when Mercia Square was built. The present excavation and redevelopment is the latest chapter in the story of this corner of Chester.

What Happens Next?

The work of digging the site is only the tip of the archaeological iceberg. All the finds need to be cleaned, identified, catalogued and the more fragile ones conserved. The plans and records made on site will be carefully assessed. There will be two end results. The finds and records will form an archive available for study by students in the future. Also, the story of the site will be written and published in the Archaeological Service's series of reports. This will be available for the public to buy and read.

Simon W Ward

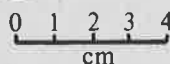
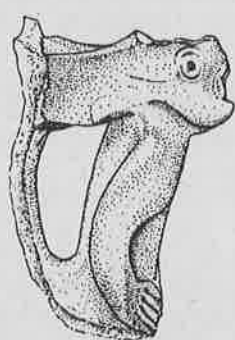
The Finds

An unusually wide range of objects was found. This was chiefly due to the wet soil conditions already noted. However, the nature of the site as a large open ditch also made it an ideal place to throw away all sorts of rubbish. The finds represent both household and industrial waste.

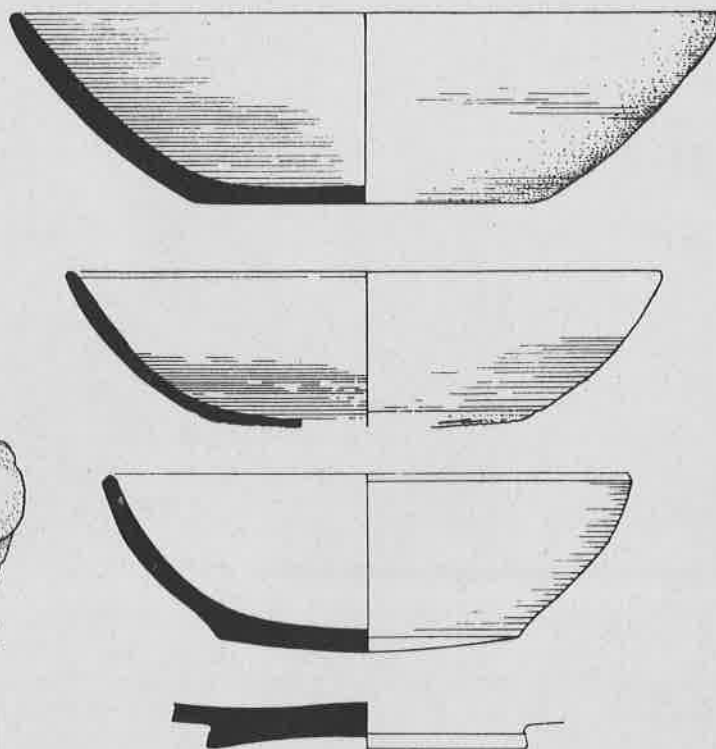
The household rubbish included large amounts of 13th and 14th century pottery with some almost complete vessels which were preserved from breakage by the soft mud. These pots are mainly jugs and storage vessels, but there are also cooking pots such as fragments of cauldrons. However, medieval people did not only use pottery vessels, as is shown by the pieces of at least twelve different wooden bowls and dishes. Pieces of rope, wicker objects and wooden buckets or barrels were also found. Other common features of medieval rubbish were leather shoes: two complete shoes and a number of pieces were found, together with bits of leather which may have been parts of clothing.

Waste material from industrial activities such as carpentry, antler working and metalworking were found in the ditch. The wet soil had preserved timber offcuts and wooden planks. Lumps of slag and clinker and pieces of sawn antler represent metalworking and the manufacture of antler tools and objects. Closer examination of the leather fragments may also reveal cobbler's waste.

Julie Edwards



'Anthropomorphic' spout
Tubular spout from a jug or pitcher, decorated to look like a human figure or perhaps a gargoyle. It was generally common in the 13th century to decorate pots with human or animal features, but this is one of the few pieces from Chester to show human features.

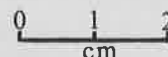
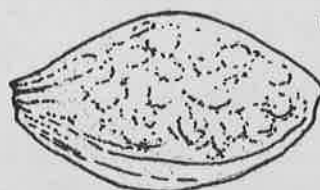


Wooden bowls
Pottery is very common on archaeological sites, so it is often forgotten that other materials were also used to make tablewares. Pieces from at least 12 different wooden bowls were found.

Environmental Evidence

The organic material included large quantities of plant remains, twigs and branches, as well as worked timber, wooden bowls and leather shoes. All these were preserved in unusual circumstances which have not been recorded before in Chester on such a large scale.

Among the plant remains were fragments of hazel nut and walnut shells, numerous fruit stones and pips, and pieces of moss. In addition, lots of soil samples were taken from various phases of the ditch fills. These will all be sieved. Judging by what has been found in them so far - seeds and fly pupae - it seems that cess and domestic waste was dumped into the ditches; this may have come



Primitive plum stone from cess.
Unlike nowadays, in medieval times fruit stones were swallowed with the flesh.



Hazel nut shell

from latrines, cess pits, rubbish pits and so on. By precisely identifying these remains, we will be able to find out what people ate, how their diet changed over the centuries, and build up a picture of their local environment and general living conditions - and the picture that is emerging at the moment is not a very pleasant one!

Lesley Harrison