

Two thousand years of urban life in microcosm

A new report from Chester's Archaeological Service puts life in the city centre under the microscope as never before

Excavations in the backlands on the east side of Bridge Street have provided a wealth of archaeological evidence for 2,000 years of the city's history. Combined with documentary references, this has enabled us to build up a detailed picture of the evolution of Chester's urban form and the trades, lifestyle and status of the people who lived in the area.

THE excavation took place in 2001 and 2002 prior to the extension of the Browns of Chester store (Debenhams), behind the shops on Bridge Street Row and Eastgate Street Row – in the heart of medieval Chester and the Roman legionary fortress.

Substantial Roman residential buildings and a large assemblage of artefacts including rare types of decorated roof tile and marble columns were recovered.

A timber building was constructed over the remains of the Roman stone building in the Saxon period but the excavation was particularly significant for the light that it has shed on the hitherto obscure period in Chester's history between the Norman conquest and the late twelfth century. During this period the area between Bridge Street and Newgate Street was divided down the middle by a north-south ditch. Broad properties known as burgage plots may have run back from the streets. These plots were subsequently sub-divided into narrower ones



Roman roof tile decorated with the face of the god Jupiter Ammon (photo: S Warburton)

in the late fourteenth/fifteenth centuries, and were bounded by stone walls that survived into the late eighteenth century.

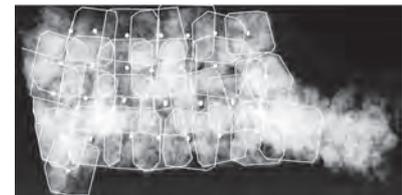
A lot of information about these plots and their occupiers is preserved in the city archives, and in some cases it was possible to associate particular plots with people named in the documents. The finds from this period include a wide range of personal items, pottery and re-used decorated floor tiles. There is also evidence for the leather trade. Sheep skins were imported to produce gloves, purses and shoes.

From the fifteenth century Bridge Street Row became known as Mercers' Row. Archaeological evidence for mercers or cloth merchants was found in the form of sewing pins, scissors, lace tags and cloth seals.

A large stone-lined cess pit, which went out of use in the sixteenth century, produced a large quantity of household and building rubbish – mugs from Cologne, jars from Spain, and glass vessels. A totally unexpected find in the bottom of the pit was the forelimb of an elephant. Possibly brought to the city as a cu-

rio, the bone was a considerable age when it found its way into the cess pit as it has been radiocarbon dated to between 1290 and 1410.

A large house belonging to the Fletcher family was situated somewhere on the site in the seventeenth century. They were hat- and felt-makers and skippers. An inventory for Robert Fletcher of 1617 shows him owning a quantity of arms and armour. A jack-of-plate (a type of armour consisting of small iron plates stitched together between layers of fabric in the style of doublets) was found in a context dating to sometime in the first half of the seventeenth century. This is a rare discovery in a domestic context and was conceivably owned by Robert Fletcher.



X-radiograph of a fragment of jack-of-plates

This period saw changes in the status and diet of the inhabitants. Suckling pig and venison were being eaten with an increase in the number of species of wildfowl such as heron, teal and oystercatcher. There was also more fish being consumed, especially herring, eel and flatfish. Cod and other deep-sea fish make their appearance at this time, significantly later than on the east coast.

After the Civil War the area continued to be occupied by some of the city's leading families, and there is documentary evidence that large





Seventeenth-century tin-glazed ware bowl
(photo: S Warburton)

sums of money were spent on rebuilding houses on the street frontage. A connection between the documentary and archaeological evidence is again seen with the Anderton family – prominent in trade with Dublin and in the government of the city. The contents of a pit associated with their premises and an inventory of 1693 suggest what the contents of a prosperous Chester household may have looked like. Large quantities of pottery and glass were found including Chinese porcelain and high-class goblets. As well as drinking wine, members of the household smoked tobacco in keeping with the trend of the times.

In the late eighteenth century the number of buildings increased and in the nineteenth century the site became known as Fletcher's Court after John Fletcher, owner of the *Chester Chronicle*. The *Chester Chronicle* office moved to the site and remained there until the late twentieth century.

The groups of Roman and early post-medieval ceramics, clay pipes, vessel glass, well preserved animal bones and plant remains are the largest to be published from the city, in some cases from the north west, ensuring that this book remains a major reference work for years to come.

Dan Garner *et al* *Excavations at Chester 25 Bridge Street 2001. Two thousand years of urban life in microcosm* is published by Chester City Council, 2008. Archaeological Service Excavation and Survey Report **14** 451pp, 236 illustrations. ISBN 978-1-872587-21-9. Available from the Grosvenor Museum shop at a special discount price of £25 (plus £4.20 p&p) until the end of March, thereafter £30.



Museum news

Projet JADE

An international research project has shed dramatic light on a jade axehead found in Chester in 1914

THE axehead, found during excavations in Hunter Street, turns out to have been made of Alpine rock and is one of the youngest of its type to reach Britain. Further research will hopefully pinpoint exactly where it was made and even other axeheads made from the same piece of rock.

It used to be believed that 'jade' axeheads came from China, but it was later suggested that they were in fact made from Alpine rock. There has been increasing interest in the 160 or so axeheads made of jadeite (the correct geological term) and other Alpine rocks in Britain and Ireland over the past few decades. However, it is only since 2003 that the riddle of the sources has been cracked, thanks to the work of a remarkable French husband and wife team, Pierre and Anne-Marie Pétrequin. Since 2006 an international research project on Alpine axeheads, *Projet JADE*, has produced some spectacular results.

The Pétrequins' pioneering work scoured the Alpine valleys above Turin and Genoa, looking for raw material and evidence for its working. Their hard work paid off in 2003, when they found their first evidence for exploitation of a jadeite block during the Neolithic period. Since then many other working sites have been discovered.

Since 2006 *Projet JADE* has compiled a Europe-wide list of all large (more than 14 cm) Neolithic axeheads made from Alpine rocks (namely jadeite, eclogite, omphacite, etc). For Britain and Ireland, all Alpine artefacts of whatever size are covered, as they are comparatively rare. Using a non-destructive analytical technique, a database of over 12,000 readings has been built up, from the analysis of over 1,600 axeheads, plus material samples and working debris. This allows any axehead's composition to be matched with all 12,000+ readings, to help pinpoint its source.

The research has shown that axeheads travelled up to 1,800 km from their source and that widely spaced specimens actually derive from the

same parent block of material. It is believed that most of those found in Britain and Ireland were brought over c 4,000 BC by small groups of pioneering farmers from northern France. Many would have been at least a century old when they were brought here. They would have been treasured possessions, possibly supposed to have magical properties.

The project co-ordinator for the UK, Ireland and the Channel Islands, Dr Alison Sheridan, contacted the Grosvenor Museum after finding a reference to a jadeite axehead in our collections. In fact, it had already been sent to the British Museum in 1974 to investigate its composition, but this analysis reported that the source was likely to prove very elusive. The axehead returned to the British Museum for further analysis by Dr Michael Errera, who is undertaking the massive task of comparing all 12,000+ analytical results to pinpoint the exact source of the axehead's raw material and any 'sibling' axeheads which can be identified from the same block.

In the meantime, Pierre Pétrequin has been able to identify the axehead found at Chester as a 'Puy' type: this type was made during the last centuries of the fifth millennium and is among the 'youngest' of the Alpine axeheads to reach Britain.



Jade axehead from Hunter Street, length: 128 mm
(photo: National Museums Scotland)

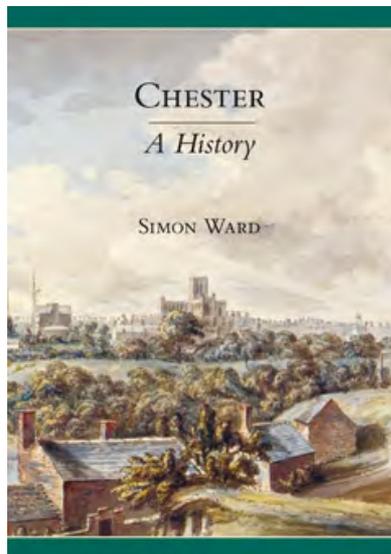
Elizabeth Royles, *Keeper of Early History, Grosvenor Museum*
Alison Sheridan, *Head of Early Prehistory, National Museums Scotland*

A history of Chester

A new book by Chester Archaeology's Simon Ward on Chester's long and fascinating history is due to be published in the spring, aimed at both resident and visitor

The establishment of the Roman fortress at Chester around 74 AD was the stimulus for the growth of a prosperous town with such attributes of classical civilisation as bath houses, central heating and an amphitheatre. The fifth-century collapse was followed by expansion under Saxon Mercia, and the threat of Viking attack was countered by the creation of a *burh*. Chester prospered as an administrative and trading settlement, ultimately benefiting from commercial contacts with the Viking world. After the Norman Conquest, it became the capital of a powerful earldom and later Edward I's headquarters for his conquest of north Wales. A large abbey dominated the centre and swathes of land were enclosed in friary precincts.

After the Middle Ages the city lost its harbour to silting and then endured a long and damaging siege during the Civil War. It escaped full-scale industrial expansion, although it did suffer from the accompanying problems of increasing population and poor housing. In the twentieth century the decision over whether to preserve or replace its historic core gave the city fathers one of their greatest challenges. Chester was for many centuries the major urban centre in north-west England. Despite its varying fortunes the city has nev-



er ceased to engage in the trade and commerce that have given the place its own special identity.

This beautifully illustrated book explores the city through the ages and looks at the activities of the people who contributed to its intriguing story.

Chester: a history by Simon Ward. 114pp, 150 illus. Phillimore & Co Ltd 2009, ISBN 13 978-1-86077-499-7. Hardback £16.99, available from the Grosvenor Museum shop or order online from www.phillimore.co.uk for a pre-publication special offer price (until end of March 2009).

Portable Antiquities Scheme

The post of Finds Liaison Officer in Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire has now been split into two positions. Vanessa Oakden is the new part-time officer and will be covering the Cheshire area. She will be based with Frances McIntosh at National Museums Liverpool.

Vanessa visits the Grosvenor Museum in Chester on the second Friday of each month and the Salt Museum in Northwich on the last Thursday of each month, and is available from 10 am until 4 pm to identify and record archaeological objects found by members of the public and advise on Treasure. Vanessa also visits the Mold, Crewe and Nantwich, West Kirby and South Lancashire and Cheshire metal detecting clubs on a regular basis.

Contact Vanessa on 0151 478 4259. Mobile 07900828826. vanessa.oakden@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

Changes to local government

As many of our readers will be aware, local government in Cheshire is undergoing a major reorganisation. As from 1 April this year Chester City Council, Cheshire County Council and the borough councils of Ellesmere Port and Neston and Vale Royal will no longer exist but will merge into the new authority of Cheshire West and Chester. Similarly, in the east of the county, the new authority Cheshire East will encompass the borough councils of Crewe and Nantwich, Congleton, and Macclesfield.

Discussions on the provision of archaeology and conservation services have been taking place over many months. It is envisaged that

from April the archaeologists and conservation officers currently working for the various relevant authorities will be reconfigured within the new Environment Directorate. They will continue to deliver a range of services including maintenance of the Historic Environment Record, including the public access database, conservation and archaeological advice on planning applications, policies, heritage asset management and specialist expertise in artefact and environmental archaeology. We will continue to be involved in the management of the City Walls and the amphitheatre.

We will be able to publish more details and report on the progress of the service after the beginning of April.

Our last newsletter

As a consequence of local government reorganisation this will be the last newsletter in the current format. Once the new archaeology service is established we will be looking at ways of keeping you up-to-date with news about fieldwork, finds, projects and events.



Amphitheatre news

As stated in our previous newsletter (see *Past Uncovered* October 2008) work is continuing on the thousands of artefacts from the amphitheatre excavations – here are just a few of the results that are beginning to emerge from our recording and assessment of the material.

Food at the amphitheatre

DURING the excavation we recognised that there was more fish bone from a single pit just outside the walls of the amphitheatre than has been recovered from all of the other Roman sites in Chester combined.

In addition, recent work has shown that there are many more small perching birds (Passerines, the size of thrushes, blackbirds and sparrows) than previously recorded from any other Roman site excavated in Chester, many of which are represented by tiny bones. Various other species are unusually common at the amphitheatre. For example, eighty records of woodcock from Roman deposits (and still counting) compared to ten records or fewer from other Roman sites.

Why are there these differences? One part of the answer is that on nearly all of the other sites (many excavated some time ago) there was little, if any, sieving of soil samples. At the amphitheatre, the process of wet-sieving many soil samples meant that we recovered the small bones that are missed on excavations which rely on the hand-collection of finds only.

The work on the environmental samples is continuing to extend our knowledge of foods eaten in Chester and already suggests that some people ate a wider range of meats than we do today.

Also of significance in our understanding of what went on in and around the amphitheatre are fragments of what are thought to be portable ovens. These may have been used for the preparation of hot

snacks for sale to spectators. So far, more than twenty fragments have been recovered and are clearly from several ovens, some of which are sooted through use. A decorated rim of an oven was found at the amphitheatre during excavations in the 1960s, although it was not recognised at the time. A similar rim of one of these vessels was found in a Roman context during excavations at 25 Bridge Street in 2001 where it may have been used for serving hot food to visitors to the fortress baths. We know that similar ovens were made at Holt, 12 km from Chester, and only one other is known outside Chester – from a bronze-smith's workshop at Prestatyn, where it may have served an industrial function.

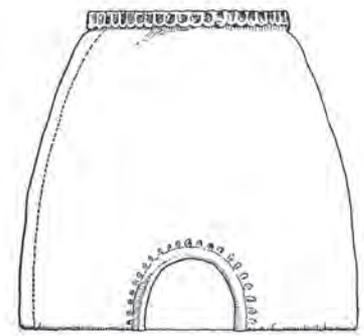
Roman buildings?

The assemblage of Roman ceramic building materials such as roof tiles, bricks (in a range of shapes and sizes), fragments of chimney, facing tiles and vaulting tubes from the site is proving to be more informative than might have been thought.

We know that the amphitheatre itself did not have a tiled roof – so where does all the building material found on the site come from? Some was used as make-up for the seating bank and road; some was dumped in pits along with other rubbish; and some may have come from ancillary buildings associated with the amphitheatre, such as the shrine with its painted plaster walls, which may well have had a tiled roof and floor.

It has been possible to assign a date to some of the roof tiles which should provide useful additional dating evidence for some of the activities associated with the amphitheatre, as well as the various phases of construction and rebuilding.

Much of the tile and brick probably came from demolished buildings in both the fortress and the extramural settlement to the south and east. Building debris from the fortress may well include the fragments of vaulting tubes used in the construction of the high-vaulted rooms of the legionary bath house. These date to the reconstruction of the fortress and its buildings in the 220s



Representation of a ceramic portable oven. (From W F Grimes 1930 Holt pottery in *Y Cymmrodor*)

and 230s AD. Similarly, small floor bricks which were laid in a herring-bone pattern were used in the fortress baths.

Work will continue on the assessments of all the finds from the amphitheatre in preparation for publication.

Alison Heke and Ian Smith

A large-print version of this newsletter is available. Please phone (01244) 402023 or fax (01244) 347522

The Past Uncovered

is produced by the City Council's Archaeology, Design and Conservation Services to keep you in touch with discoveries in Chester and the surrounding area. Copies can be obtained from the Grosvenor Museum and other City Council venues or by post direct from Chester Archaeology. If you have any comments or questions, or would like to contribute, please get in touch with Gillian Dunn at Chester Archaeology, 27 Grosvenor Street, Chester CH1 2DD. ☎ (01244) 402023.

This newsletter is also available on the internet at:
http://www.chester.gov.uk/PDF/news1_February09_A4.pdf

Printed by Chester City Council
Print Unit on
environmentally friendly paper



**Chester
City Council**