

# **AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATION AT REDDITCH:**

## **The development of the South East Quadrant.**

Although there have been significant archaeological excavations at Bordesley Abbey on the outskirts of Redditch yet there has never been an excavation within the confines of the town itself. Consequently any information we have on the medieval beginnings of the town of Redditch relies on a few documentary references and a skilled interpretation of map evidence and the current layout of the present town in relation to the regional road system.

The proposal to develop the South East Quadrant provided the opportunity for the first time to examine the archaeology of Redditch and to assess the extent to which remains of the early history of the town survive buried below ground.

In the first instance the Field Archaeology Section of Hereford and Worcester County Council undertook a series of evaluation trenches across the whole area of the proposed development and these trenches highlighted areas of potentially important archaeological survival. Of particular significance was the area to the immediate West and North of the Palace Theatre, an area which fronts on to Alcester Street, a road forming part of the crossroads which was the hub of the medieval town of Redditch. It was then decided that this area would benefit from a larger scale excavation and subsequently Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit were asked to undertake this work. Excavations took place in October of this year and the results were most promising.

At the time of writing the results of the excavation, including finds and environmental information are still being assessed and so it must be stressed that the following account of the site must be considered as provisional and will nearly definitely be subject to reinterpretation to a greater or lesser degree once all available information has been analysed and incorporated into the final report.

The site was occupied until fairly recently by a needle making factory. The brick buildings of which had substantial foundations which seriously disrupted the lower /earlier archaeological deposits. Map evidence would suggest that this part of Redditch was being used for industrial purposes from the mid nineteenth century onwards. Across the whole site predating all the industrial buildings was a layer of black loam. This appears to have been a garden soil and contained a great deal of Victorian pottery fragments etc.

to the South of the site a deposit of roofing tiles was found overlying this soil. These tiles were associated with a sandstone foundation of which only a corner was exposed. The existence of roofing tile and the lack of building rubble would suggest that the sandstone foundations supported a timber framed structure roofed in clay tile. The date of the destruction of this building would be in the middle of the nineteenth century immediately in advance of the gardens /grounds being given over to industrial usage. Evidence for dating the construction of this building came with clay pipe bowls and pottery from close to its foundations and these indicated a date in the later seventeenth century. It would appear that by this time the settlement of Redditch was expanding along the line of Alcester Street. Associated in date with the construction of this building was a depression running across the centre of the site approximately from West to East. This was filled with a deposit of black loam with much late seventeenth century pottery. It seems probable that this was a purposeful deposition of material intended to level the ground surface presumably in association with the construction of the building and the use of the surrounding grounds as gardens.

The reason for this depression became clear as the excavation progressed. Running across the site was a very large ditch or moat (6.0m wide and c3.0m deep) and this had been backfilled over a period of time. Substantial deposits of clay deposited within the upper levels of the moat would suggest that the later backfilling was deliberate rather than a gradual silting up of the ditch. Nevertheless the backfilling had subsided thus necessitating the later seventeenth century deposits to level up the ground surface. Pottery evidence would suggest that the ditch was open in the later fifteenth century but what was it for? To the South of the ditch no evidence of human activity was evident at this period and it would appear likely that the area between the ditch and Alcester Street was used for agricultural purposes. To the North of the ditch however we have a different picture. Immediately overlying the natural subsoil was a cobbled surface which appears to be contemporary with the construction of the ditch and which at the moment is interpreted as a trackway running inside the ditch. Overlying this are deposits of loam and a clay seal with posthole and beam slot associated with them. Here we have two phases of activity on this part of the site. The ditch is interpreted as being a moat encircling a platform which would have been used to site a manor house. The excavation was not sufficiently extensive to detect much information about the structures which would have comprised the manor house and its subsidiary buildings, however the excellent survival of archaeological deposits in the area of the excavation would indicate that further to the North such deposits would continue and provide just such information.

The excavation at Redditch has provided information on the development of this part of the town from the medieval period onwards, equally importantly it has provided a well stratified sequence of pottery fabrics and types which will be useful in interpreting any future excavations, also, when analysis is completed we will have significant environmental information which should assist in understanding agricultural practices as they developed from the medieval to the post medieval periods. However possibly most importantly the excavation has demonstrated just how much of the history of Redditch is preserved below the present ground surface and how essential it is that future developments within the town be closely monitored to ensure that this fragile heritage is not lost forever.

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