

# NOTES

## A Salvage Excavation near Reigate Priory

### with a note on a medieval seal die from the Priory Park

This note deals with a short excavation that took place in early August 1990 close to Reigate Priory (TQ 254 500) following the initial ground works for a new children's playground. The works, which took place without archaeological supervision, involved the stripping of about 0.3m of grass and topsoil over an area of about 400 sq m about 40m to the south-east of the Priory (fig 1). Following this work there was sufficient time for a limited archaeological excavation for which permission was readily given by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council.

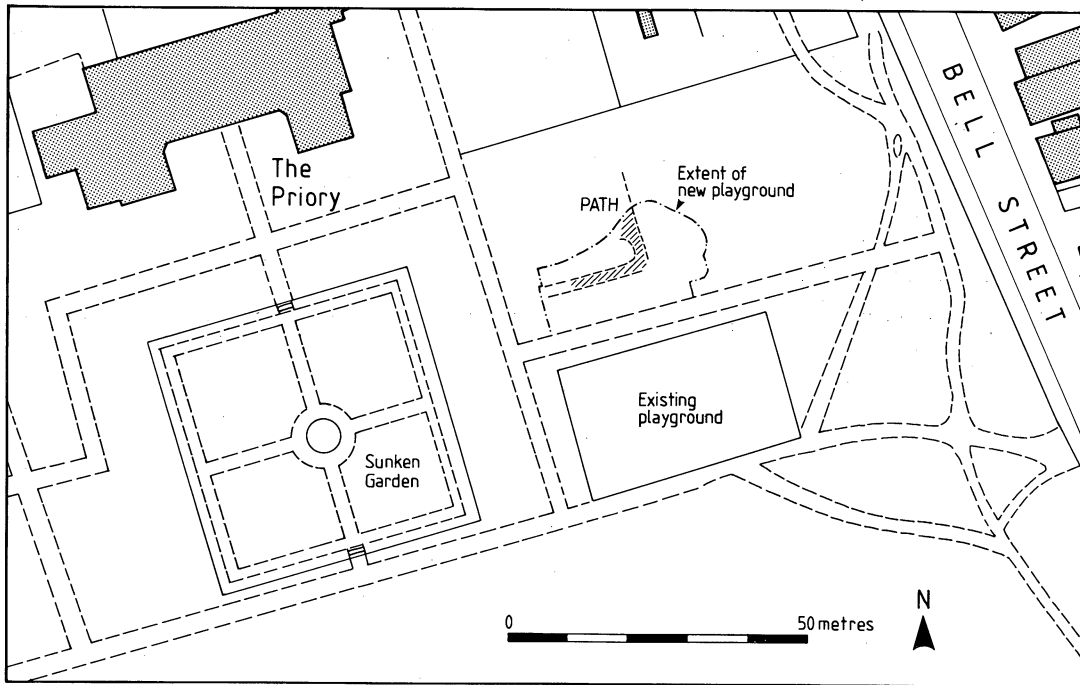


Fig 1. Part of Priory Park showing the location of the excavation and the new playground.

Prior to the excavation no archaeological features were visible in the exposed light grey, loose, dry sandy subsoil (fig 2, 9) which covered the stripped area along whose north side a trench was laid out 2m wide by about 17m long. The main feature described in this note, which is interpreted as the line of a former path, was crossed by this trench at two points (fig 2). Initially it was not realized that these apparently separate layers formed part of the same feature but after pursuing one of the layers southwards by extending the trench at one point it was rapidly realized that the two layers were, in reality, parts of the same linear feature. The bounds of the initial trench were thus abandoned and work proceeded on uncovering as much of the path as was possible within the limited time available.

The loose grey sand (9) which concealed and lay to either side of the path contained a few sherds of medieval pottery, some tile fragments and an iron buckle. A metal detector scan of the

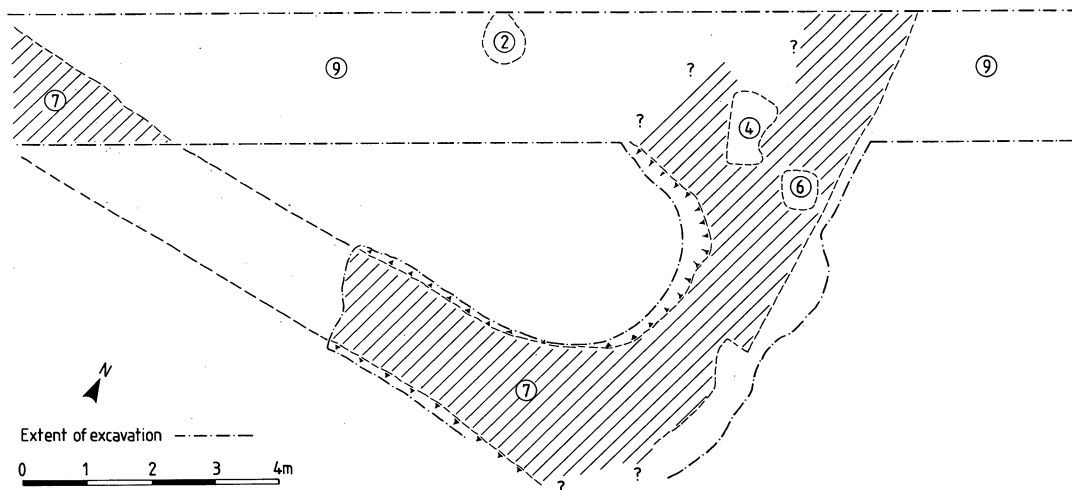


Fig 2. Priory Park. Plan of the excavated features.

area of the new playground as well as the soil dumped from the machining similarly failed to recover any significant archaeological material. There were three intrusive features, all probably recent planting pits (fig 2:2, 4 and 6).

Although it was not possible to uncover the whole length of the path within the area available, about 11m of it was traced running in an east-west orientation and 9m from north to south. The plan as recovered also suggests another arm of the path leading westwards from the section which runs north-south but this area had been disturbed and was unclear. The precise form and position of the external south-eastern corner were also not recorded. The width of the path varied but on its less disturbed southern stretch was about 1.5m. The path consisted of two layers, a shallow rubble foundation (8) and a cambered surface of compact yellow-brown sand (7). Nowhere was the combined depth of these two layers more than about 0.15m. Layer 8 was of considerable interest, comprising large amounts of imported building stone along with roof tile and smaller quantities of plain floor tile and brick. Pottery from this layer was confined to three medieval sherds and part of a post-medieval glazed red ware base.

The stone fragments from layer 8 included examples of the following:<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Shelly limestone from the Purbeck formation, probably from the Corbula Beds, Langton Matravers.
- 2 Shelly limestone from the Purbeck formation. Could be either from the Corbula Beds or from the Broken Shell Limestone at the top of the Purbeck formation.
- 3 Possibly Lower Cretaceous, Ashdown Sands.
- 4 A buff sandy limestone which looks like a Bathonian limestone. Contains an ostracod *Cypridea* sp. Purbeck or Wealden.
- 5 Pale yellow-buff, Middle Jurassic, oolitic limestone. Wrong colour for Bath oolite, possibly Inferior Oolite from Somerset or Gloucestershire.
- 6 Dark grey Palaeozoic shale. Possible Upper Carboniferous. Some fragments apparently decomposed with a loose powdery surface.
- 7 Pale buff non-oolitic limestone with shell debris and ostracods. Could be Purbeck formation.
- 8 Fine-grained yellow buff sandstone. Lower Jurassic, Toarcian (a stage in the Lower Jurassic). Perhaps Ham Hill stone.

There also appears to be a single example of Reigate Stone (Upper Greensand).

Stone-types 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 are present as fragments of straight-sided flat slabs of varying thickness (up to 50mm in the case of stone-types 1 and 2, 23mm for stone-type 3 and 40mm for stone-type 6) which would have formed either paving or wall cladding. Most exhibit traces of bedding mortar on their lower surfaces and most have been smoothed to some extent on their upper surfaces. A sample of stone 6 has been finely polished smooth. Most of these stones are too fragmentary to give dimensions; an example of stone-type 3 however is

155mm wide. The other stone-types, 4, 5, 8 and perhaps 7 appear to have been used as building stone. An example of type 4 carries a straight laying-out line. Stone-type 5 seems to have been used for decorative work. A single example (fig 3) with a simple moulding on one corner probably derives from a surround to a door or window. Other fragments of this coarse and friable stone may also have been worked, but were in too small pieces to ensure certainty.

Of the retained peg tiles, one almost complete example measures 198mm × (originally) c300mm. This is in a coarse, soft, orange fabric and may be medieval. Other tiles, in a harder fabric, are smaller, measuring from 135mm to 155mm wide and seem later in date. There is a single fragment from a hip tile.

Two large fragments of plain floor tiles were recovered. One measures 205mm and was probably square. Both are 45mm thick and one has been mortared over its broken surfaces. A further, less well finished tile fragment is in a hard buff fabric (34mm thick). Of the two retained brick fragments one is in a soft dark red fabric (105 × 63 × ?mm) and the other (100 × 58 × ?mm) has been more highly fired with a dark grey glassy glaze.

A corroded iron object may be part of a latch with a rectangular-section shank.

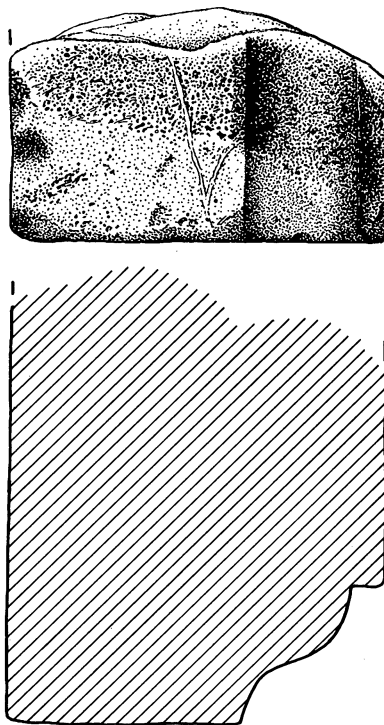


Fig 3. Priory Park. Fragment of moulded oolite from the path foundation. Scale 1:2.

### Dating and interpretation

The linear feature can be confidently interpreted as a path. Despite the limited scope of the excavation it seems that the remains form a right angle section which aligns with the orientation of the Priory as well as with the present path system, which is of recent date. The plan suggests that a second east-west stretch of path (now mostly destroyed) left the north-south stretch to run parallel to its partner on the south. These two paths may have enclosed a flower bed.

Next to nothing is known of the layout of the medieval priory buildings and associated features. Human remains, presumably part of the monastic cemetery, were found in the late 19th century during abortive excavations for a sunken garden to the south of the Priory.<sup>2</sup> The present sunken garden apparently incorporates an earlier wall which forms its north side.<sup>3</sup> No features which could be associated with the medieval priory were found in the present excavation although the limited area which could be reduced to natural sand did not preclude the existence of cut features such as graves. The path, which predates the present late Victorian layout, is a post-medieval feature. Its foundation contained a fragment of a redware base which is probably of 17th or 18th century date. The glazed brick would also not be out of place in an 18th century context. The rubble clearly derives from a substantial building of some pretension and it is unnecessary to look further than to the Priory itself for the source. Whether any of the material derives from the medieval buildings is uncertain although some of the roof tile may do so. None of the various building stones are commonly met with in excavations in the town and it seems best to associate them, in particular the oolites and shale, with a post-monastic phase of the building. Similar large floor tiles have been found in late 16th century contexts (for instance at Brewery Yard, Bell Street: Williams 1980).

Reigate Priory was granted to the Howards who were in residence by 1543 (Scears c1950, 16) and they continued to own it until 1681 when the estate was purchased by Sir John Parsons. It seems reasonable to conclude that the path formed part of the Priory's formal gardens in the 18th century and incorporated rubble deriving in part from the demolition of a section of the Howards' mansion.

### A Medieval Seal Die from the Priory Park

This seal (fig 4) was found in 1988 by Mr T Lane with the aid of a metal detector on the wooded east-facing slope of the easternmost of four dry valleys which lead northwards from the ridge which forms the highest part of Priory Park (at TQ 252 495).

Geoff Egan comments:

This pointed-oval copper-alloy seal die belongs to a well-known category which includes examples in lead alloys and is usually dated from the late 12th to late 13th century (see Rigold 1977; Spencer 1984). Both the main device, the Lamb of God and the surrounding legend which refers to it (*ecce agnus dei*) in Lombardic letters are paralleled by a find from London (Spencer *op cit*, 379–80, fig 3:14). The loop near one end could have been used for suspension from a chain and as a grip when the seal was applied to the wax.

Seals on which neither the device nor the legend refers specifically to the owner were produced in some numbers in the medieval period. They represent a cheaper option than having the arms and legend engraved by commission.

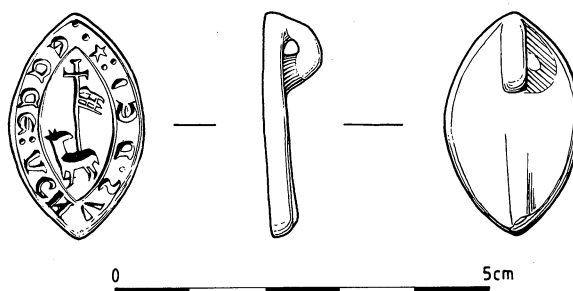


Fig 4 Medieval seal-die from Priory Park. Scale 1:1.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to the Department of Technical Services at Reigate and Banstead Borough Council for allowing the excavation to proceed at short notice; to Noel Morris and Phil Palmer of the British Museum (Natural History) for their identifications of the stone types; to the late Bob Burtenshaw for the detector survey; to Geoff Egan for examining and commenting on the seal; and to Terry Lane for allowing the seal to be recorded.

### NOTES

- 1 Eight samples of stone were submitted for identification to Noel Morris and Phil Palmer of the Department of Palaeontology at the British Museum (Natural History). Their comments are incorporated into the text
- 2 Not the present sunken garden. According to Scears (*c*1950) the burials were left undisturbed and the sunken garden moved further south, to its present position
- 3 Scears (*op cit*) thought that this had formed part of the 'south Cloister building'. The visible wall is not convincing as a medieval structure

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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