Excavations on the Site of Simpson’s Malt, Pontefract: An Introduction

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The archaeological excavations were carried out by Archaeological Services WYAS in 2007 and 2008 and were required as mitigation in advance of housing development on the site of a former malt factory, following the discovery of archaeological features during an evaluation by trial trenching (AOC Archaeology 2004). The work was carried out for Rippon Homes Limited and the findings from the 2007–8 investigation have been fully reported as an unpublished technical report to satisfy planning requirements under PPG16 (Weston and Roberts 2011). Four discrete areas were investigated (Areas A–D). Areas A and B, in the western part of the site, contained a large number of rock-cut medieval features, Area C was essentially blank, whilst Area D at the eastern end of the site is remarkable for containing a number of Roman ditches and, more significantly, the remains of a medieval pottery kiln. The discovery of the kiln resulted in a parallel research project that was funded by English Heritage. A compelling case for funding (PPG assistance) was made by virtue of the fact that the kiln’s products were virtually indistinguishable from the pottery that had previously been attributed to kilns in Stamford, Lincolnshire, operating in the late 11th and 12th centuries.

The kiln’s significance became more marked once the results of the scientific dating were obtained, from a programme of work coordinated by John Meadows of English Heritage. Both radiocarbon and archaeomagnetic methods were employed: duplicate radiocarbon samples being supplied to the SUERC Laboratory in Glasgow and the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit; whilst an archaeomagnetic determination was produced by the Department of Archaeological Sciences, at the University of Bradford. A separate report on the dating has been published by English Heritage (Greenwood et al. 2010), which has concluded that the last firing of the kiln probably took place in the early 11th century, a date which has considerable implications for the conventional dating of the Stamford wares in question, and the dating of the archaeological deposits from which they have come.

Following a short note in Medieval Archaeology 53 (Roberts and Cumberpatch 2009), a comprehensive report was published in Medieval Archaeology 57 (Cumberpatch and Roberts 2013). Due to the limited space available in the journal, it was agreed that the more detailed technical reports arising from the analyses of the pottery would be published through the Archaeological Data Service. These reports principally comprise an extensive appraisal of the range of pottery forms and decoration techniques by C.G. Cumberpatch, a report on the petrographic analysis by R.A. Ixer, and a report on the chemical analysis of the pottery using ICP by M.J. Hughes. These reports are accompanied by a
comprehensive set of pottery illustrations prepared by Jon Prudhoe and Chris Philo (Figs 1–86). The drawings used to illustrate grey literature report (Weston and Roberts 2011) are provided as Figures 90–94, which may be used in tandem with the context concordance tables from the same report (Table 37), to help establish the provenance of material presented and discussed in the presented reports.

The important role of the members of the Pontefract Community Project is gratefully acknowledged. This group was set up by Pam Judkins of Wakefield Museums, specifically so that the whole assemblage from the kiln could be washed, marked, reconstructed and curated. Funding was not available for all of this work and the contribution of the group in taking on this work over several weeks has enhanced the value of the analysis enormously.

The full site archive is eventually to be deposited with Wakefield Museum, once the archaeological work on the site has been completed. A subsequent planning application saw a further archaeological condition applied to the site in 2010. In 2012 the area to the east of the kiln was investigated, revealing more Roman and medieval features. No additional kilns were found, but some of the features have produced Stamford type ware. At the time of writing (July 2013) there are still further excavations pending in the western two thirds of the site.