

Assessment of the leather from Birmingham Road, Litchfield (OSA07 EV14)

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Methodology

The assessment has been made following an initial scan of the leather on 27/05/2008. The leather was identified and diagnostic pieces dated. A basic record (as defined in the RFG/FRG Guidelines (Roman Finds Group and Finds Research Group AD 700-1700 1993) was made, including measurement of relevant dimensions and species identification where possible. The basic record in the form of an object catalogue is provided in an appendix. The information gathered has been correlated with the available contextual information and summarized below.

All measurements are in millimetres (mm). No allowance has been made for shrinkage. Any shoe sizing has been calculated according to the modern English Shoe-Size scale.

Leather species were identified by hair follicle pattern using low powered magnification. Where the grain surface of the leather was heavily worn identification was not always possible. The grain pattern of sheep and goat skins are difficult to distinguish and have been grouped together as sheep/goat when the distinction could not be made. Shoe soles, rands and repairs are assumed to be of cattle hide unless stated otherwise

Condition

The wet leather is washed and is triple bagged in self-sealing polythene bags within an air-tight storage box.

Provenance

The leather was recovered from three contexts [723, 726, 730] from the town boundary ditch, these represent fill of the original ditch [726] and two fills [723, 730] of a recut [731].

Range and date of the material

Context 726: The fragmentary remains of two medieval turnshoes of adult size and a harness strap or belt were found in fill [726] of the town boundary ditch. The side lacing short boot of calfskin that extended above the ankle is of a style in use for much of the medieval period. The toggle-fastening ankleshoe of cattle hide is of a style that dates from the mid 13th to the mid 14th century. Diagnostic features present on these two shoes suggest they date to the first half of the 14th century. They appear to be domestic rubbish.

Context 723: The fill [723] of a recut [731] of the town boundary ditch contained shoe parts from three shoes of medieval date, two pieces of waste leather and 26 small pieces of wood bark. The shoe parts comprised a near complete turnshoe sole, the toe area broken from a repaired turnshoe, the toe piece from a turnshoe sole made of a number of pieces, likely to be a cobbler's repair, and a clump seat repair. The shoe parts are likely to date to the second half of the 14th or the 15th century and appear to be rubbish from a cobbler's workshop rather than domestic rubbish.

Context 730: A piece of folded sheet leather was found in the black clay fill [730] of the recut [731] directly below [723]. The leather has a series of random small oval holes scattered across the surface apparently caused by fungal growth. Similar damage is seen in leather that has been subject to mould growth whilst in wet storage which suggests that the leather had been on a midden or similar environment for a time before being dumped into the ditch as back fill.

Potential for analysis

A single shoe of medieval date was recovered from the Swan Hotel, the site of a medieval tannery (Mould 2008). Little, if any, other medieval leather has been recovered from the locality previously. If it has, it has not been made available to a wider audience. As such, the leather from this site is of local and region interest. Leather has been recovered from stretches of town ditch that have been investigated from a number of towns across the country in recent years and this material will add to the growing dataset.

The leather will provide independent dating to support that from the ceramic and numismatic evidence. It provides information regarding one of the leatherworking trades, cobbling, being undertaken in the town and may be used to suggest something of the mechanism by which the town boundary ditch was in-filled. The presence of the bark in association with leather in a fill [723] of the recut may possibly be related to other leatherworking trades such as oak bark tanning. It is suggested that the bark is seen by a specialist and the species identified if possible.

Work required

Details of this material should be added to that deriving from any further investigations of the town boundary ditch. If no further stretches of the town boundary ditch are investigated in the near future the leather should be recorded, and diagnostic pieces illustrated to provide a record of the dating evidence. The material should be summarised for incorporation into any site narrative.

Conservation and storage

The wet leather can be stored safely while awaiting remedial conservation providing it is kept cool and light is excluded, however, wet leather cannot be stored indefinitely. The eventual

repository of the site archive should be consulted regarding their discard and retention policy for wet organic material. It is usual for this to follow that recommended in the SMA Guidelines and unlikely that they will accept wet material. **Provision should be made for the leather to be conserved.**

Bibliography

Mould, Q. (2008) Leather from the Swan Hotel, Litchfield.

Roman Finds Group and Finds Research Group AD 700-1700 (1993) The Guidelines for the Preparation of Site Archives and Assessments for all finds other than fired clay vessels. Roman Finds Group//Finds Research Group AD 700-1700

Appendix: The Leather from Birmingham Road, Litchfield (OSA 07 EV14) in context order

Context 723

Complete **turnshoe sole for the right foot, adult size**. Pointed toe, petal-shaped tread, narrow waist and medium seat. Edge/flesh seam, stitch length 5mm, broken away along the right side of the forepart. No sign of repair, slight wear at exterior seat, no other pronounced wear. Adult 6(39). Length 264mm, width tread 75mm, waist 25mm, seat 51mm

Separate pointed **toe from a multi-part turnshoe sole** with edge/flesh seam along all three sides, stitch length 7mm. Tunnel stitching on grain side from repair. Length 44mm, width 32mm

Broad upper tread area of turnshoe for left foot, adult size. Turnshoe sole worn at the oval toe and torn away across the tread. Edge/flesh seam, stitch length 6mm. Tunnel stitching from repair clump to the toe area only. Length 100+mm, width 90mm. Matching crescentic toe repair clump, worn/broken away at the toe, with tunnel stitching around the surviving edges. Length 70mm, width 74mm

Rand from left side of the toe and tread, width 4mm, and lasting margin from left side of the oval toe area of the shoe upper, stitch length 6mm. Leather bovine 2.24mm thick

Waist and upper seat area of turnshoe sole, adult size. Cut and torn away along the upper edge, worn and broken along the lower edge. Possibly, but not necessarily, from the shoe parts (3) above. Edge/flesh seam, stitch length 6mm. No obvious signs of repair. Length 89+mm, width waist 32mm, seat 54mm

Worn and broken **clump seat repair, probably for the right foot, adult size**. Tunnel stitching around the surviving edges. Length 95mm, width 58mm

Waste leather, sub-rectangular fragment with cut and torn edges and a small length of possible hide edge. Leather cattle hide. 92x46x2.75mm

Primary waste, hide edge. Leather cattle hide. 88x56x4.86mm

26 fragments of **bark**

Context 726

Side-lacing ankle boot of Turnshoe construction for right foot, adolescent/small adult size. Turnshoe sole with toe missing, torn across the upper tread with medium waist and seat worn away at the exterior edge. Edge/flesh seam, stitch length 8mm. No repair. Rand fragment, width 9mm. Highly fragmentary remains of shoe upper with lasting margin, stitch length 8mm, and side lacing. Lace hole lining with seven lace holes remaining (not complete), spaced 12-15mm apart. Tall heel stiffener c. 100mm high. Leather upper worn

calf (poss. sheep/goatskin) 1.07mm thick, lace hole lining and heel stiffener calfskin. Sole length 180++mm, width tread 69mm, waist 28mm, seat 40+mm

Toggle-fastening shoe upper, adult size. Fragment of left side of sole and rand, width 10mm. No repair present. Left side of upper from the tread to around the heel with lasting margin, stitch length 6mm. The left side of the upper has a vertical edge/flesh seam, whip stitched top edge extending into a fastening latchet with a fastening hole for a rolled toggle. Upper insert with a heavily worn lasting margin and two seams with a V-shaped seam in one side, top area torn. Leather upper cattle hide 2.07mm thick

Strap, torn at each end with a line of oblique, grain/flesh stitching along each edge. Two buckle pin holes present at one end. Leather cattle hide 3.96mm thick. Length 176mm, width 23mm

Context 730

Waste leather, unusable area of hide. Large piece of sheet leather, folded. Now in two pieces, torn along the fold, with a small fragment torn from them. The sheet has two cut edges meeting at a right-angled corner, one straight the other with a concave curve. A random scatter of clean, oval-shaped holes present from microbial action. The sheet was originally folded in half and then in half again when thrown away. Present dimensions when flattened out 436x355x130mm.

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