

STAFFORD CASTLE

Survey, Excavation and Research 1978-98

Volume II – The Excavations

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Introduction

by IAIN SODEN

The Stafford Castle project

The honorial castle at Stafford lies just outside the town at NGR: SJ 902 223 (Fig 1). Today it overlooks the M6 motorway and dominates every motorway journey past the town. However, the visitor to the town itself can be forgiven for missing the castle altogether. The castle should not be confused with the site of the early royal castle within the town. Despite its marginal position, the surviving castle's place in Stafford's history has been long and prominent.

The project has had far-reaching effects within Stafford Borough. The town felt at the time of excavation that it was re-discovering its 'lost' castle. The sense of personal and corporate ownership was almost tangible and the site is today a tremendous focus of civic pride. The Stafford Castle Project has raised the profile of archaeology in Stafford Borough in large measure.

The excavations at Stafford Castle reported here took place between 1978 and 1991, under the direction of Charles Hill, John Darlington and their respective supervisors. They were conceived as part of a civic desire to enhance the site of the castle as a visitor-attraction for the town. The site had come perilously close to widespread demolition and sale before a curious and far-sighted Stafford Borough Council decided to learn more about its history and archaeology. The project grew almost organically. This was augmented by widespread archaeological opportunism and prompted by the apparent wealth of labour in the mid-1980s when the Manpower Services Commission supported British Archaeology. As development began to outstrip the resources of the fledgling English Heritage (set up to succeed to – amongst other things – the Department of Environment's responsibilities in 1984), archaeology entered a funding and staffing vacuum. The end of the MSC in the late 1980s left a gap not filled until Planning Policy Guidance

(PPG) Note 16 was introduced in 1990 with entirely development-prompted excavation and developer-funding, together with the rapid emergence of a wide professional base of archaeologists. Unfortunately, with the gradual demise of MSC in 1987-8, resources for post-excavation became largely unavailable to many midlands sites including Dudley Castle, Hulton Abbey, Sandwell Priory, Coventry Charterhouse. However, only Dudley now lacks final publication.

While from the outset the Stafford Castle Project benefited from an academic advisor (Dr Philip Barker, then Reader in Archaeology at Birmingham University) the excavation lacked an "explicit or detailed programme of work leading to the production of an archive and subsequent publication reports" (observation by John Darlington, formerly Stafford Borough Archaeologist, 6 March 1996). For many years thereafter the process of post-excavation processing and analysis became tortuous although by 1996 proposals were in place for a publication to be edited by Philip Barker. However, it also highlighted a serious drawback after so many years of excavation, that: "both (the Borough Archaeologist and the Assistant Archaeologist) had no previous contact with the castle excavation".

The first volume on the Castle surveys was prepared and published in 2001 as *Stafford Castle: Volume 1*. However, most of this work was related to the upstanding remains and the topography of the castle, surveyed using a variety of analyses in the 1990s. Some work was published in digest form (highly speculative interim reports in the 1980s and a substantial note in Higham and Barker's book 'Timber Castles' (1992, 289-93)). Fuller reporting remained elusive. Little further progress was made by 2003 and potential for the work was imperilled by the death of Dr Philip Barker in January 2001, the project losing its academic advisor and editor-designate. His death saddened all British archaeology.

To some extent the successive departures of all the archaeologists who had enjoyed links with the Stafford Castle Project comprised a serious bar to progress. Several new starts were required. New research designs only partly addressed the considerable limitations of the evidence and as a result, the post-excavation programme proceeded very slowly.

Direct negotiations between English Heritage and Stafford Borough Council in 2003 led to the decision in January 2004 to commission publication from external consultants. Accordingly in April 2004 Stafford Borough Council commissioned Northamptonshire Archaeology to carry out a review of the state of the Stafford Castle Project publication archive to assess its readiness for final publication and recommend measures to enable the current publication to take place. The work fulfils the obligations and commitments by Stafford Borough Council under the terms of their Scheduled Monument Consent for excavation issued by the then Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment (1978) and his successors in subsequent departments (now the Department of Culture Media and Sport, as advised by English Heritage).

With the benefit of hindsight, the following updated general and specific aims for this report were set out in a Project Design subsequently agreed (2005).

General aims

These were to present the results of the 1978-91 excavations in order to realise remaining potential as regards to:

- Stafford's place in medieval castle studies, both as high status residence and fortified stronghold, by comparison in form, planning, development and construction methodologies with similar, comparable castles within the region and beyond.
- Stafford's interaction with the nearby town, its people and its economy and markets, together with the surrounding rural hinterland and its provision of foodstuffs and other natural resources. This principally by recourse to understanding of the material assemblages from excavation.
- To place Stafford Castle firmly within a wider regional understanding as espoused in the West Midlands Archaeological Research Framework (draft 2003).

Care has been exercised throughout to avoid repetition of the contents of Volume 1 (2001).

Specific aims and limitations of the evidence

The monument of Stafford castle itself, 2km from Stafford town centre (Fig 1), today comprises a

prominent elongated rectangular motte surmounted by a truncated nineteenth-century sandstone sham-keep (Fig 2). This too is rectangular with a multi-angular tower at each corner and was the site of widespread excavations (Site A). To the north-east of and directly adjoining the motte lies an inner bailey enclosed with massive ditches which accentuate the natural fall of the land and a discontinuous earthen bank on their inner edge. Excavation (Site B) and survey suggests this bank may always have been discontinuous, adequate defence being provided by the huge ditches and a timber palisade. They also suggest that some terracing of this site has also taken place, of which some earthworks still survive. Adjoining the south-east portion of the inner bailey is a further ditched and banked enclosure, the outer bailey. This contains many small earthworks, but this area has never been the location of any excavation. Still further from the motte, and lying between the outer bailey and gardens along the modern road, 'Castle Bank' stand the enclosed earthworks of the 'middle settlement site', containing another excavated area (Site D). This area is marked by an in-filled former hollow-way which once linked the road with the baileys and faint earthworks of former house-plots and ridge-and-furrow cultivation. South-west of the middle settlement site is the current access to the castle from Castle Bank. On the far side of this thoroughfare lies the current castle visitor centre, also the site of archaeological excavations (Site E).

The excavations primarily comprised four independent areas (A, B, D and E; Fig 2), which together constituted one of the largest excavated areas on a midlands medieval site at that time. In actual fact, even added together, they only amount to about 5% of the defended area and its associated settlement. Today this proportion would constitute little more than a typical site evaluation, from which few specific conclusions would be drawn. This sobering thought is seen to be a huge limitation of the evidence which even now has far-reaching consequences upon our understanding of the data.

Site A

The aim is to present understanding of the 1348 keep and its development in order to summarise the below-ground remains within a sequence and wider study of the development of medieval castle fortifications. These should take into account the surveys published in Volume 1 (but not revisit them in detail). To better understand the construction of the early keep and the engineering of the motte and its fourteenth-century redevelopment. The nineteenth-century sham-keep

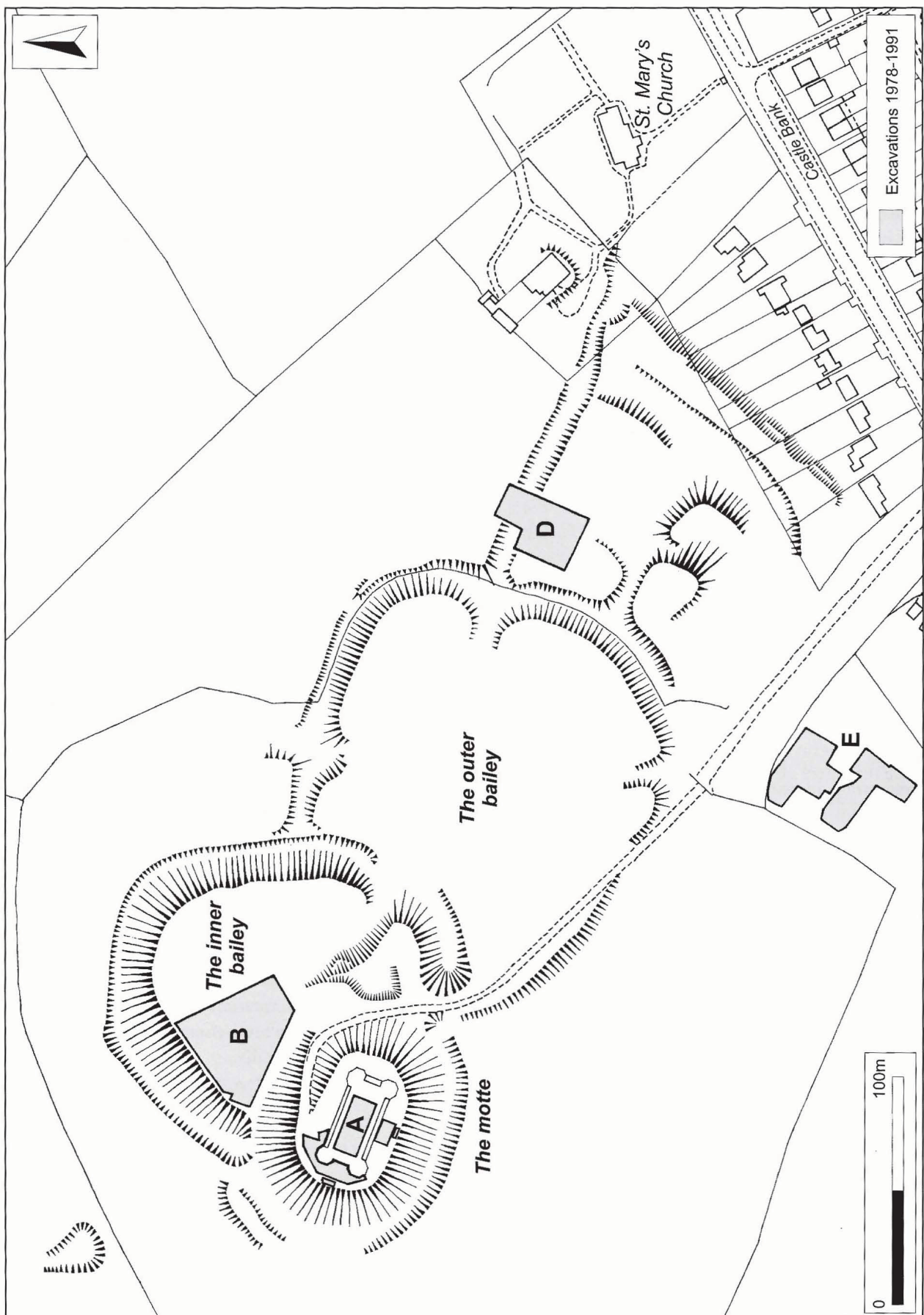


Fig 2 Location of excavations and principal Castle Earthworks.

is considered to have been sufficiently dealt with in Volume 1 such that the excavation results are not revisited here but are retained in archive. The limits of the evidence are provided by the fact that the majority of the fieldwork was directed, not at the medieval fabric, but at the nineteenth-century sham keep. In many cases the fieldwork stopped as it reached medieval levels, particularly on the interior, where the medieval cellars were not widely emptied. Thus the level of finds relevance is indicated by only c.10% of the pottery relating to the medieval motte and its occupation.

Site B

The aim is to present understanding of development of the inner bailey and the development of its component buildings as a guide to the changing function of the castle. To present understanding of the development of the bailey defences, including the loss of the motte ditch and the motte bridge, in line with the castle's changing place in society. To compare the results of excavation with similar sites and draw appropriate comparison. The evidence is severely hampered by the fact that when the Site B area was doubled in size, the increased area was found to have been almost entirely terraced and quarried away in the post-medieval period. Nevertheless, work continued and as a result the vast majority of finds from the inner bailey are residual, and therefore have little bearing on understanding the medieval castle. Note that there never was an excavated Site C.

Site D

Here the aim is to present understanding of the 'middle settlement site' beyond the outer bailey and the establishment, development and decline of the peripheral settlement of the castle and the relationship between the two. When Dr Philip Barker identified this area in 1975 as part of the Castle settlement, he saw it as a prime site for his particular brand of meticulous area-excavation, adopted so successfully at other sites. However, residuality was subsequently shown to be a huge problem. Study of the pottery showed that 74% was residual or unstratified, at variance with what the 1980s interim report suggested.

Site E

Finally the aim here was to present understanding of this, the south-west settlement site, in the same vein as Site D, with which it shares some characteristics, including, sadly, the problems of residuality brought about by subsequent ploughing and other horticulture.

Finds assemblages

Notwithstanding the widespread problems of residuality, it has been the aim to use a variety of selected finds assemblages to better understand the economy, changing use of space, spheres of influence and site formation processes of the medieval castle as it moved from fortification to residence and its eventual decline and demise as a centre of medieval power and prestige.

All of the above has been effected, to some extent, through the presentation of the changing topography, the site plan and layout, structures and their construction methodologies and selected artefactual and ecofactual assemblages deriving from each area. Comparisons with finds from similar sites and known, wholly different, contemporary sites enables a wider appreciation of the changing status of the castle, its place in local society and its relative importance as stronghold, residence and economic motor throughout the medieval period.

While huge issues of residuality have widely affected the relevance of much finds-related data, meaning that much is consigned to archive, it was decided that the pottery from the castle still warranted wider publication of drawings and discussion of the fabrics and forms present. From excavations elsewhere the typologies presented here are known to be medieval and early post-medieval and their appearance at Stafford is in keeping with county-wide and regional trends. However, even sixteen years after the excavations concluded at Stafford Castle, the pottery assemblage still remains the largest excavated in Staffordshire and has a typological and stylistic importance for other unpublished material and even yet to be excavated for many years to come. Its own particular importance has endured, despite the residuality.

A cut-off point has been employed in the selection process. The reader will note that the importance of the medieval is stressed throughout. While there is continued debate about the exact date at which the medieval world can be said to have ended, for Stafford Castle the last major date at which the castle played a significant part in history is the Civil War (1642-9). This period is considered to be the historical cut-off point. Excavated features, contexts and finds post-dating the civil war are not reported here, comprising mainly agriculture, quarrying and destructive building works. Their records are retained in archive for the continued benefit of those who wish to continue research into the post-medieval period.

Summary of excavation results

The results of the excavations in the four principal areas of the castle comprise:

Site A

Part of the motte top, around and within the 1348 keep and nineteenth-century sham-keep. This uncovered evidence for the layout of the original Norman motte-top and a possible late Norman stone keep, together with the motte extension in 1348 to take the foundations of Ralph Stafford's new keep with polygonal stone towers. Further alterations were noted which derive from the sixteenth century when the castle was a principal residence. A nineteenth-century sham-keep was built on the foundations of its predecessor and thus caused considerable damage. Finds evidence was sparse when set against other areas.

Site B

Part of the inner bailey, including stone buildings and evidence of the original eleventh- to twelfth-century castle. The area is enclosed by a deep defensive ditch and rampart. The buried motte ditch was recorded along with terracing. The principal buildings within this area, which had otherwise been heavily affected by quarrying in antiquity, were the original motte/bailey bridge, irregular round buildings (one of which was erroneously described during excavation as a tower), ovens, and fifteenth- to sixteenth-century buildings, including one repeatedly altered and surviving well into the post-medieval period. Finds evidence for occupation is widespread in each phase although there was a great deal of residuality.

Site D

Part of the middle settlement site was excavated, including a dense scatter of structural settlement features and a hollow-way, leading to the castle gate. Finds evidence points to smithing and corn drying taking place although dating is sketchy due to heavy damage from ploughing. A huge proportion of finds (74% of pottery) was residual in topsoil due to ploughing.

Site E

Excavation beyond the outer bailey, dug in advance of construction of the current visitor-centre. The site comprised settlement features and a coeval enclosure. Another roadway was flanked by settlement features which included further finds evidence of corn drying

and a smithy. This site showed a drop in the intensity of occupation in the thirteenth century and its demise as part of the castle sometime in the fourteenth century. Finds evidence is widespread in relation to the occupation but, like Site D, ploughing ensured high levels of residuality.

Smaller sites F, G and H were also excavated on the motte but these are considered not to be of sufficient moment to warrant the same level of analysis and reporting as A-E. Their results are retained in archive. There was no Site C.

Excavation methodologies

The basic site records followed the Museum of London's site manual (1980). The context sheet provided the main unitary record. Singular artefacts or those of intrinsic interest were recorded as small finds or special finds, with individual recording as opposed to bulk-recording for pottery, animal bone etc. Levels of recovery and discard, however, were not noted. Sampling for environmental purposes was subjective and was at the discretion of the site director (later the Borough Archaeologist) and site supervisors, and thus varied considerably over the life of the project leading to very disjointed coverage with little comparable material. Site drawings at 1:20 for plans and 1:10 or 1:20 for sections were generated within a 5m grid based upon the Wroxeter (1966-85) excavations as pioneered by the project consultant, the late Dr Philip Barker. All excavation was planar, open-area, in the manner of Dr Barker's recommendations although single-context planning was only deployed in 1991 for Site E. Photographic recording was carried out using 35mm SLR format in both colour transparency and black and white negative media with related prints, supplemented occasionally by medium-format black and white media to facilitate plan photo-montages, in conjunction with a photographic tower.

At the completion of fieldwork the excavations were backfilled at a level approximating to that of the medieval ground surface and dressed with 150mm of Bredon gravel.

Phasing and dating

The site was originally phased according to a series of period divisions (A-M) determined by the excavator. These have since been incorporated into a system of phasing which can be applied across all the excavated sites at Stafford Castle (Phases 1-9, of which 1-6 are presented here, 7-9 being post-Civil War) and which are outlined below. The following subdivisions were arrived at principally in the area of Sites A, the keep and -more particularly- Site B, the inner bailey, where

the most detailed sequence survived. To some extent the other excavated sites outside the castle (D and E) reflect this same sequence although in neither was the same breakdown into sub-phases possible with any confidence. Consequently in those sites in particular the overall phases 1-6 are just as likely to be encountered with no further sub-division. The phases with defining elements of sub-phases are as follows:

Phase 1: Pre-Castle deposits (up to c.1070)

- Phase 1.1 Natural sands, gravels and marls.
- Phase 1.2 Pre-castle rampart and motte construction surfaces.

Phase 2: The Norman castle (c.1070-1348)

- Phase 2.1 Rampart and motte construction c.1070-1120.
- Phase 2.2 Keep, palisade, bridge and tower, construction c.1070-1120.
- Phase 2.3 Keep, palisade, bridge and tower, alterations and occupation c.1120-1225/50.
- Phase 2.4 Keep, palisade, bridge and tower, alterations and occupation c.1225/50-1348.
- Phase 2.5 Keep, palisade, bridge and tower, destruction just before c.1348.

Phase 3: The 1348 keep and other buildings (1348-c.1425)

- Phase 3.1 Motte ditch backfill and new keep construction 1348 onwards.
- Phase 3.2 Construction of buildings on top of the backfilled motte ditch; occupation deposits within the inner bailey c.1350-1390.
- Phase 3.3 Demolition of buildings within the inner bailey c.1390-1425.

Phase 4: Later medieval occupation (c.1425-1500)

- Phase 4.1 Construction of structures and ovens within the inner bailey c.1425-1450.
- Phase 4.2 Use and reuse of structures and ovens within the inner bailey c.1450-1475.
- Phase 4.3 Destruction of structures within the inner bailey: round building c.1475-1500.

Phase 5: New building (c.1500-1600)

- Phase 5.1 Destruction of ovens within the inner bailey.
- Phase 5.2 Construction of a multi-phase stone building within the inner bailey.
- Phase 5.3 A rectangular timber-framed building within the inner bailey.
- Phase 5.4 First alterations to multi-phase stone building.
- Phase 5.5 Cut for abortive "well" and initial backfill. Widespread clearance within the inner bailey.

Phase 6: The demise of the castle and Civil War destruction (c.1600-1650)

- Phase 6.1 Seventeenth century deposits and adaptation of multi-phase stone inner bailey building.
- Phase 6.2 Terracing and backfill in the inner bailey. Civil War destruction.

The following, largely destructive phases were also identified in the archaeological record. They did not complement the medieval castle in any way, but rather they denuded what remained. They are not presented in detail within the current report but are retained in archive for future research, as appropriate.

Phase 7: Denuding the bailey (c.1650-1800)

- Phase 7.1 Backfill of quarry in the inner bailey.
- Phase 7.2 Eighteenth century activity within the inner bailey.

Phase 8: The sham-keep and other activity (c.1800-1900)

- Phase 8.1 Terracing and backfill in inner bailey. Construction of the sham-keep.
- Phase 8.2 Nineteenth-century occupation of the keep, and adaptation chapel building.
- Phase 8.3 Bailey landscaping. Occupation deposits within the keep.
- Phase 8.4 Occupation deposits within the keep.

Phase 9: Landscaping, demolition and occupation (c.1900-present)

- Phase 9.1 Occupation deposits within the keep. Bailey landscaping

Phase 9.2	Occupation deposits within the keep. Loss of last inner bailey structures
Phase 9.3	Occupation deposits within the keep. Late activity the inner bailey
Phase 9.4	Demolition deposits within the keep. Topsoil and associated deposits

Editorial note

Since the site encompassed over 8000 individually numbered contexts over a period of fourteen years and the very last of these numbers was assigned over sixteen years ago, the appearance of numerical labels has been largely avoided. Detailed descriptions of contexts (which appear in parenthesis) are not usually given in the text but interpretative labels are used instead

to avoid the confusion of separating huge amounts of data from interpretation. The process of editing has ensured that only those contexts, features and groups of such which are integral to the understanding of the castle structures, the sequence of events, or the discussion are included here. The reader is referred to the huge site archive and its component reports if further information is required for research purposes (Stoke-on-Trent Museum). In the same way very large numbers of finds were recorded in excavation, of which a significant proportion was residual in the context from which they were retrieved. Thus the individual finds reports are here edited to concentrate principally upon those finds which were well-stratified, not residual, and those which still appear by virtue of their intrinsic value (either due to singular nature, remarkable quality or relative rarity) to wider studies of their particular find-type, material or function.