

BLACK LION INN, FISHPOOL STREET, ST ALBANS

RESCUE EXCAVATION

SUMMARY

In 1994 during car park and disabled access development work behind the Black Lion Inn, St Albans a possible Roman corn dryer or malting oven, a later first century well and later features were recorded through the August Bank Holiday Weekend (27th–29th August). Supervised volunteers predominantly and very successfully undertook this work.

INTRODUCTION

St Albans Museums Service was alerted to development work at the Black Lion Inn, Fishpool Street, St Albans (TL 138 075: c.80m OD; Figs. 1 and 2). The location of the site was to the rear of extramural Roman properties lining the road to Colchester. This ran from the gate sited close to the Rose and Crown public house, under Kingsbury Manor, to the east of the Branch Road Bath House, through the Folly Lane ceremonial site (Niblett 1991) and over the hill to Colchester (Camulodunum). The frontage would have lain under, or just to the south east of, the Dairycrest tithe barn opposite and would have been close to the Roman river crossing. By the twelfth century this road alignment had changed. Fishpool Street, almost at right angles to the original Roman alignment, became the main axis, pointing towards the Abbey and its medieval town.

Finds have long been made on Branch Road. At the corner with Verulam Road Mr C Saunders, from St Albans Museums Service, excavated a large bath house (Urban Archaeological

Database (UAD) Monument 143), and observed, under St Michael's Memorial Hall car park, timber structures and associated features (C Saunders pers. comm.). Members of the general public have also mentioned that, while digging their local gardens, they have unearthed artefacts. Roman features and a building have recently been uncovered on the old Dairy site during a Watching Brief by St Albans Museums Service on the manor house site (2002/3; site code KSB02 and KSB03) and during an evaluation on the Dairy site (2003) by (R. Niblett pers. comm.; UAD Event 702 and Monument 725).

EXCAVATION

On the Thursday, prior to the Bank Holiday, a member of the general public observed that the contractor had struck a wall or foundation and informed Verulamium Museum. An immediate stop was called to the development until an assessment took place. It was soon agreed that work could proceed over the majority of the area where thick Victorian garden and rubbish deposits were being removed by JCB. Work on site came about in order to extend the pub and its car park, which at one time had been the beer garden and was heavily overgrown and included a reduction in height to that of the original garden and car park. In addition, this created a need for drainage and a deep soakaway. The proposal was to add approximately nine car-parking spaces; disabled access to a new bedroom and generally tidy up the area. The JCB driver pointed out the location of the walls and these were quickly cleared and excavated on the following day. It was at first thought that these were part of a corridor to an extramural domestic structure. However, an almost complete plan of a possible large Roman corn dryer or malting oven was uncovered along with a well, possibly dating from the first century AD and later twelfth to fourteenth, and sixteenth century features. Most of these were

left unexcavated, as only the uppermost levels were due to be lost, the undisturbed sealed beneath tarmac.

RESULTS

POSSIBLE ROMAN CORN DRYER/MALTING OVEN

Against the northern end of the site a chamber running north-west to south-east was uncovered formed of two parallel walls 0.84m wide, surviving to a length of 6.5m, with an internal width between them of 2.24m and a maximum height of 0.6m (Fig 3). They were linked at the north-west end by a similar cross wall, mostly lost, destroyed by a Victorian wall foundation. This is interpreted as a continuous wall as there was no evidence for a flue or stokehole surviving cut into the chalk beyond the Victorian wall. At the south-east end, central and leading south-east from this walled rectangle was a tile flue (005)¹ extending 1.84m beyond the ends of the flint wall and 0.94m across internally, terminating in a stoke hole 0.84m across (004). Both were excavated into the chalky-clay and Clay-with-flints natural. The tile flue had been heavily burnt in the middle (024) with the natural surround discoloured by the firing. The flue was composed of tiles used to bridge the gaps over the columns of pilae from a hypocaust; several whole examples were recovered.

Soil samples taken from the flue were analysed for environmental remains. Preliminary work was undertaken initially by Mrs. M Murphy (St Albans Museums Service) with further identification by Ms P E Wagner (University of Sheffield). There were a total of two specimens present of a type of weevil (*Tarratostichus stussineri*) originating from across the Eastern Alps and Carpathians possibly indicating long distance trade in

¹ Features are denoted by [], fills within features or layers are denoted by ().

the Roman period. Some examples of fragments of charcoalsed wood had also been pierced by small holes consistent with the activity of wood boring beetles.

The north-east side flint walls of the chamber and flue were constructed against the natural chalk bank of the hill slope where it had been cut back to provide a platform. As the natural was a decayed chalk, this was fairly soft and allowed for the accurate construction of verticals and right angles for the structure.

The wall on the north-east side of the chamber, at its lowest level, still retained its pink mortar, as did some of the floor (028). Visible from the end adjacent to the flue, for a distance of 2.36m beginning at a height of 0.05m above the base of the chamber, there was a ledge standing proud of the wall, composed of mortar. There are two possible explanations for this: either at this end there was a suspended floor, whereas, further away from the flue as evidenced by the discontinuous remains of a mortared floor, it sat directly on natural. Alternatively, there could have been vertical or horizontal shuttering up the walls across this third of the chamber, the ledge acting as a stable base on which to rest it.

Against the south-east baulk there was a small rectangular foundation (037) approximately 0.8m across and surviving to a height of 0.16m which extended from the face of the section 0.28m into the area of the new car park. It appeared to have had a slightly different alignment than the main chamber and was at first thought to be a second oven. However, it proved to have been robbed. After additional contractor's work this was lost but it may have been a foundation for a structure over the flue. A second one would probably have been required but a later medieval pit would have largely destroyed its position.

There was no direct dating available for the building. There were 27 sherds of locally produced sandy wares surviving in the destruction level (002) above the structure, typically Verulamium Region Whitewares. However these were abraded and very fragmentary making dating closer than between c. AD 80 to AD 200, or perhaps later, impossible to ascertain. The Bathhouse at Branch road went out of use some time in this later period and it may be that the pilae tiles used in constructing the flue were from the robbing of this structure. No medieval or later artefacts came from within the building. However, it has been suggested that the structure was Medieval, and that it utilised the freely available local building material, Verulamium. The Roman finds would then be all residual, a not impossible proposition given its location.

FIRST CENTURY WELL

The top of a well (025) with a cone diameter of 4 m, containing first century artefacts, was disturbed by machine to approximately 3 m. The very top was packed with large loose flint nodules to a depth of 1 m over a silty-clay fill, the flints perhaps a final solid fill acting as a secure foundation. The artefacts were recovered by hand from the discarded soil left by the machine prior to backfilling; these included the remains of a first century blue-green pillar-moulded glass bowl (possibly Isings form 3, either a first century import or more likely a slightly later copy, examples are known from Fishbourne, Camulodunum and Richborough (Tomalin 1987, 43 and Fig B1) and a whetstone (Fig. 4), pottery and building materials.

MEDIEVAL

A series of six medieval pits and three probable wells were uncovered over the southern area of the site nearest to the frontage of Fishpool Street. Three of the pits closest to the oven

were excavated by hand [008], [009]² and [011], others were observed as the garden topsoil was removed and the surface of the natural was lowered for drainage. The three that were excavated proved to be relatively shallow, although original depth is unknown. They had an average diameter of 2.8 m and an average depth of 0.8 m. Pit [011] was cut by [009], which in turn was cut by [008]. The majority of the finds were pottery sherds and animal bone. A study of the former by pit may be useful in distinguishing between later and earlier medieval features by the percentage of pottery types with either Greyware or early post-medieval wares being predominant.

Features farthest away from the present buildings were the pits, probably for rubbish disposal; those closer appeared to be wells, presumably for ease of access to water. From these, only small machine samples were recovered from the surface. As the fills appeared to be silty it is probable that the lower fills had decayed and contracted creating an opportunity for largely artefact free soils to become incorporated into the top. It is possible therefore that the wells are earlier, possibly much earlier, than the dating from their latest fills.

In the fill (026) of the pit in the north-east corner there is a fragment of a clunch³ vessel, possibly a mortar. Clunch is normally viewed as being used after the Norman Conquest, and then only after reused Roman building material was the first source for construction. A similar almost complete stone mortar was retrieved from the Lloyds Bank site on Chequer Street in 1982⁴; this was only missing the base.

POST HOLE

² Fill (007) also contained an AE3 of Valens 364-78.

³ Clunch is a hard form of limestone deriving from the lower and harder beds of Upper Chalk, possibly from Bedfordshire.

⁴ Site Code C.82; Context code AP (3) /21\.

In the northern baulk section at the back of the site a small feature was visible in the chalk with a surviving diameter of 0.31 m and a depth of 0.45 m. It was on the same alignment as the modern building division, and presumably the medieval one, between the present Black Lion Inn and its neighbour. There were no other similar features, although later truncation during the Victorian and modern periods could have removed any associated ones between it and the present building boundary on the street frontage. Dating of this feature was due to its stratigraphic position within the north section and its siting on the medieval boundary.

POST-MEDIEVAL GULLY

In the post-medieval period the site was little utilised. The only negative feature discovered was a short length of gully running north to south [023]. It had a width of 0.8 m, a length of 5 m and a depth of 0.15 m. Finds from the gully included the partial remains of a red ware vessel dating from the sixteenth century. The nature and purpose of this short gully was unresolved although it may represent activity relating to the construction of the present Black Lion Inn.

UNDATED

A short gully [039] cutting a medieval pit [030] was not dated due to an absence of finds. Although it was only short and shallow, measuring 2 m long by 0.6 m wide with a depth of 0.25 m, it was aligned on the medieval and later features and buildings.

TOPSOIL AND FINAL USE

At some time two tenements on Fishpool Street were united into the present Black Lion Inn and the area behind became a car park and beer garden. It is assumed from the archaeology that

there were two tenements first, because the post hole at the rear of the site may mark the boundary and secondly, most of the remaining features were within one-half of the site suggesting differential use.

After the final feature was excavated on the southern half of the site, it was levelled to natural becoming covered in a deep grey topsoil (001). Retaining walls were built enclosing the site and rubbish backfilled behind. This contained blue and white transfer printed late eighteenth or nineteenth century pottery and other artefacts of a comparable date. The reason for this levelling was not established.

ENVIRONMENTAL

SOIL SAMPLES

Soil samples from the oven were examined for environmental remains during September 1994. All were initially washed through 2mm and 300 micron stacked sieves. One sample was bulk washed through a 1mm sieve. The residue in the 300-micron sieve was further floated to separate charcoal from the heavier residues. All residues were collected viewed under a low power microscope for biological remains. A small reference sample was retained for archive purposes.

9.1 Results

| |
|--|
| Sample 024 (Upper) |
| |
| 10 3mm by 2mm lozenge shaped thin flat pieces of ?stem, three were hollow. |
| 5 pieces of carbonised wood with tiny boreholes. |
| 1 elongated coprolite with a length of 2cms. |
| 10 Acicula specimens. |

| |
|--|
| 4 ?? Insect head/body segments (not weevil). |
| 1 ?? Amphibian bone. |
| 3 ? Nails. |
| |
| Sample 024 (Lower) |
| |
| Negative. |

DISCUSSION

The construction at the Black Lion Inn, possibly used as a corn dryer or malting oven, or for other similar processes, is one of a category of multi-functional utilitarian structures utilised within the Roman economy. From its size there is a good argument for its interpretation for use in other than a domestic context, probably part of an undefined small-scale industrial site situated closer to the street frontage. It is possible that all along the street leading out of the town there were similar small-scale sites, and possibly associated shops. It is tempting to suggest that this was part of an Inn, supplying travellers or pilgrims visiting Folly Lane (Niblett 1999).

A similar, but smaller structure was uncovered at Sacrewell (Morris, 16 and fig. 26a, 183). This consisted of a chamber approximately 2.25 m long by 2.25 m wide internally. At one end there was a central stoke hole. Its similarity to a medieval malting oven lead to its identification as a Roman version. In the malting drying process a large area for drying is needed as the damp grain is spread out in a thin layer. This is then heated from below to help uniform germination. If the floor to this structure had been raised to the level of the mortar plinth, possibly with internal support, then the large floor area would have been ideal for this process. Unfortunately, almost all internal evidence had been lost.

In the Roman period the site axis appears to be east to west, with the long side of the building at right angles to the street. By the medieval period the main axis of the site had turned 90° to face on to Fishpool Street, which became fossilised with the construction of what became the Black Lion Inn.

Surviving sections close to the building seem to indicate robbing and levelling of the structure, whether Roman or later is impossible to ascertain. Parts of the site after levelling seem to have been deliberately covered in chalk and the top of this further levelled apparently to produce a surface. The chalk may have originated from the medieval pits and wells perhaps indicating the time when deliberate destruction and robbing took place.

The posthole discovered in the eastern section may have been the limits to the southern boundary of the medieval tenement. However there was no conclusive evidence that this was a boundary marker but in section it was in line with what would have been the border of the tenement. The pits and wells were largely clustered within the property that was to become the Black Lion Inn. It also appeared that the pits were positioned further to the rear of the property, whereas the wells were more to the fore. They in their final phases had been filled with rubbish as a conveniently large rubbish pit.

A rescue/salvage excavation, outside the aegis of PPG 16, such as this one proved the value, even in these post-PPG 16 halcyon days, of an active local society who are prepared to donate their time. Perhaps a role can be found for them where PPG16 proscribes work but where a small developer is unable to pay for a full scale professional team, and a well supervised experienced volunteer rescue excavation would fill the gap and prove PPG16 to be more of a guideline than a bible for archaeologists. Those people who would otherwise lose out

when having to pay for an archaeological investigation would, I believe, appreciate this.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was due to the quick response of Museum staff, members of the St Albans and Hertfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society and an appeal at the Museum for volunteers that enough labour was found at short notice over a holiday weekend that enabled as much work to take place as did. Particular thanks must go to Mr R Miles who gave up the whole weekend to help out. In the post-excavation analysis my thanks go to all the volunteers who helped with general finds cleaning, and for their environmental assessment Mrs M Murphy (St Albans Museums Service) and Mrs P E Wagner (Sheffield University). I would also like to thank the developers who allowed work to continue with their full co-operation and assistance.

Medieval Pottery

Alison Turner-Rugg

Emergency excavations took place at the Black Lion Inn, St Albans, over the August Bank Holiday weekend 1994. This site lies close to both Roman and medieval roads, respectively the main Verulamium-Colchester road and Fishpool Street, and it is therefore not surprising that evidence of activities dating to both periods was recovered. It was in fact the discovery of a Roman com-drying or malting oven, which halted works on the car park behind the hotel. In addition to this oven, an early Roman well, three possible medieval wells or pits and six medieval pits were located. Of these six pits only three were excavated by hand.

Almost equal quantities of Roman and medieval pot were recovered from the site. There was no pot from the Roman oven itself, but the demolition layer over the top contained 27 sherds. The Roman well had been cut by a medieval pit and was excavated by machine, so it is hardly surprising that there is medieval pot recorded as coming from this feature. Pits 006 and 014+016+017 both cut pit 007. All of these three pits yielded respectable quantities of pottery, although in all cases there was slightly more Roman than medieval, incorporated from the layers through which the pits were cut. There is very little postmedieval or modern material, even in the topsoil and cleaning layers. Table 1 shows sherd counts and percentages from all the features with pot.

Table 1 Pottery by period:

| Context | Roman | Medieval | Postmed | U/C | Total Sherds |
|---------------------------|-------|----------|---------|-----|--------------|
| <u>sherd count</u> | | | | | |
| 001 | 32 | 11 | 2 | 2 | 47 |
| 002 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 27 |
| 006 | 167 | 128 | 1 | 7 | 303 |
| 007 | 82 | 47 | 1 | 0 | 130 |
| 012 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 014+016+017 | 44 | 27 | 0 | 0 | 71 |
| 018 | 13 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 25 |
| 020 | 34 | 44 | 0 | 0 | 78 |
| 022 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 8 |
| 025 | 22 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 38 |
| 026 | 9 | 9 | 1 | 0 | 19 |
| 027 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

Table 2 Percentage of pottery by period

| Context | Roman | Medieval | Postmed | U/C | Total Sherds |
|--------------------------|-------|----------|---------|-----|--------------|
| <u>percentage</u> | | | | | |
| 001 | 68 | 23 | 4 | 4 | |
| 002 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| 025 | 58 | 42 | 0 | 0 | |
| 006 | 55 | 42 | 0.3 | 2 | |
| 007 | 63 | 36 | 0.8 | 0 | |

| | | | | | |
|-------------|------|----|----|---|--|
| 012 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| 014+016+017 | 62 | 38 | 0 | 0 | |
| 018 | 52 | 48 | 0 | 0 | |
| 020 | 44 | 56 | 0 | 0 | |
| 022 | 12.5 | 0 | 87 | 0 | |
| 026 | 47 | 47 | 5 | 0 | |
| 027 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |

Table 3 Breakdown of medieval pottery from medieval features

*shw: shelly ware and all other wares with calcareous temper;
lur: local unglazed reduced sandy and gritty wares; mgr:
medieval glazed redwares; mgw: medieval glazed whitewares;
shg: South Herts Glazed.*

| context | shw | lur | Mgr | mgw | shg | total medieval |
|---------------------------|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|----------------|
| <u>sherd count</u> | | | | | | |
| 006 | 3 | 106 | 5 | 2 | 12 | 128 |
| 007 | 0 | 43 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 47 |
| 014+016+017 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 27 |
| 018 | 1 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| 020 | 1 | 43 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 44 |
| 026 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| <u>percentage</u> | | | | | | |
| 006 | 2.3 | 82.8 | 3.9 | 1.6 | 9.4 | 100 |
| 007 | 0 | 91.5 | 4.2 | 0 | 4.2 | 100 |
| 014+016+017 | 3.7 | 96.3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| 018 | 8.3 | 91.6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| 020 | 2.3 | 97.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| 026 | 0 | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |

It will be seen from Table 3 that the main medieval pottery type is unglazed reduced sandy/gritty ware, usually dated to the 12th/13th/early 14th centuries. There is a little shelly ware (6 sherds from the entire site); this material is usually dated to the 10th/12th centuries. Small amounts of glazed pot, including South Herts Glazed ware, usually dated to the 14/15th centuries were also found.

Sandy/Gritty wares

All sandy/gritty ware rims from all contexts were extracted and examined under x10 magnification. The fabric in all cases was South Herts Greyware, of the type commonly found in St Albans: well-made hard-fired thin-walled wheelmade pots, sometimes reduced throughout and some with a reddish core under dark surfaces. They are tempered with well-sorted subangular white/clear quartz, mostly under 0.5mm in size. Two jars from 006 and 020 were slightly different in that the quartz sand was less well-sorted, slightly ironstained and rather more rounded. Both the rim form and the fabric were very similar, although they were clearly not from the same vessel. Perhaps they were made by the same potter, a different source from the other vessels. There were no gritty wares and these greywares are likely to be late 12th/13th rather than earlier. These two forms of greyware will be referred to as Greywares A and B in a report on the pottery from St Stephens Church 1967 (Tumer-Rugg unpublished) where they are found with gritty wares in early medieval layers and alone in later medieval layers.

One of the jug rim/upper handles had its internal surface damaged in a way usually seen in cesspits, while the external surface was in perfect condition. Possibly this jug had been reused as a urinal at some point in its history.

One of the jars was of an unusual shape. The rim was barely thickened at all; just the edge being slightly turned outwards and the vessel appear to be distinctly globular in overall shape. Although the fabric is identical to the other greyware jugs and jars, this shape is usually found in earlier wares, 11th or 12th century.

There were two greyware jug handles with rims attached and two without rims attached, but all were in the same fabric (greyware A). All of the jug rims from the Black Lion Inn were decorated with a double row of thumbing, and 3 of the four were pricked. On one of them a double-pronged pricker had been

used. Double-thumbed handles are usually associated with the Elstree kilns.

It may be seen from table 4 below that the normal range of greyware vessel forms was recovered, namely, jugs, many jars or cooking pots, and a dripping dish fragment.

Table 4 Rim counts, greyware vessels (from all contexts)

| context | jug | jar | dripping dish | Vessel form unidentifiable | Total |
|---------------|-----|-----|---------------|----------------------------|-------|
| 001 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 006 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 4 | 9 |
| 007 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 8 |
| 014+016+017 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 018 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 020 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 7 |
| 025 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| 026 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| total vessels | 5 | 11 | 1 | 13 | 30 |

Glazed wares

There are 9 sherds of glazed medieval redware and 2 of whiteware. Two of these sherds are jug rims, and all probably come from jugs. Two are highly decorated with slip and stamps, and one of these is probably Kingston ware.

There are also twelve sherds of South Herts Glazed ware. One is the socket for a handle, probably for a dripping dish or frying pan, although there is no trace of sooting on it at all. One body sherd is presumably a bowl, as it is glazed internally rather than externally. There is a medial sherd from a pricked rod jug handle. The other nine sherds have no features worth commenting on.

On the basis of the medieval pottery it would therefore seem likely that the intersecting pits 006, 014, 016, 017 and 007 all

date from the late 13th/early 14th century. In the absence of any glazed ware the other three medieval pits may be slightly earlier, late 12th/13th century. Since the quantities of pottery are small and there is clearly, on the evidence of the fresh breaks that cannot be refitted, quite a lot of pot missing, it would be unwise to be too definite.

Transitional pottery

Seven sherds of pottery came from the gully 022. They are all thin fine redware with an orange glazed internally and externally, and the beginning of a handle attachment on one sherd. This has been identified as Early Red Border Ware (ERBOR, London terminology), dating to the 16th century.

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