

CLARES CARLTON, WELLS, SOMERSET

Archaeological Excavations 1988 : an Interim Report

Following an archaeological evaluation of the former Clares Carlton premises, Wells by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit for Lansdown Homes Ltd. in November 1987, a further phase of evaluation and salvage excavation was undertaken by BUFAU on behalf of its new owners Secure Retirement PLC in November/December 1988. The removal of public conveniences and the small car park at the E. extremity of the site and adjacent to the moat of the Bishop's Palace, permitted completion of the evaluation commissioned in 1987 (Leach, P., 1987 Clares Carlton, Wells. An Archaeological Evaluation, B.U.F.A.U.). Two mechanically excavated trenches aligned approximately N-S. linked an evaluation trench (VI) recorded in 1987 with a larger area opened at the N. end of the site (VII). The latter was designed to investigate any surviving remains of the Palace Mill, and excavation by hand was continued here for a further three week period (Fig. ...).

No direct evidence of the mill structure was found but a clearer picture of later medieval and post-medieval arrangements in its immediate vicinity was obtained. The later silts and waterlogged deposits recorded in the infilled, naturally-formed shallow valley of the St. Andrews stream were banked against a substantial clay and gravel rampart to the E. - probably the upcast from the Palace moat - forming a dam for the moat across the valley here. Some clay silts containing earlier medieval finds continued beneath the bank but were barely investigated. Part of a massive, mortared stone wall foundation continuing S.W. from the bank may originally have formed a revetment to its W. face, continuing northwards, but subsequently destroyed. If this interpretation is correct a turn of the wall to the S.W. would have deflected water flowing southwards from the mill wheel race outlet, westwards down the valley - its original course before the Palace and moat were laid out in the 13th century.

Alternatively this wall segment relates to some earlier medieval arrangement possibly connected to an earlier phase of the mill.

The subsequent history of the area involved progressive infilling of the watercourses flowing S. from the mill and then westwards down the valley. These arrangements are most clearly depicted on the Simes' map of Wells in 1735. The infill deposits contained a considerable assemblage of late and post-medieval finds, including pottery, tile, waterlogged wood and leather, animal bone and metalwork. By the end of the 18th century this process was accelerated by the erection of a small stone-founded building partly overlying the earlier silts, and evidence for some small-scale industrial process.

The destruction and redevelopment of the mill site immediately to the N., in or soon after 1835, was echoed here by levelling of the 18th-century building and an extensive dumped deposit of clay and gravel (primarily of natural origin) used to level up the area formerly occupied by watercourses. The latter were rationalised into two westward flowing conduits - that for St. Andrews Stream taking the principal flow directly via a sluice from the Palace moat (still functioning), and cut through the medieval bank of the moat dam. A second conduit to the S. still carries a slight flow, following the course of an originally open channel westwards, but seems not to be open directly to an outflow from the moat. From the information recorded here, the site and any remains of the Palace Mill must lie immediately to the N. of the new development, almost certainly beneath No.2 Town Hall Buildings.

Despite the failure to locate any remains of the Palace Mill itself, the historical topography information relating to this part of Wells and in particular the extensive sample of pottery and other finds recovered, is of considerable value. It is perhaps fortunate that the redevelopment of this site will not in fact destroy any remains of the mill, which should still survive relatively well preserved just to the N. Elsewhere, the archaeological assessments made in 1987 and in conjunction with the more extensive excavation of 1988, indicate that there should be no serious loss or damage to the remaining archaeological resource in this area.

To finalise the archaeological response to this project, two tasks remain:

1. The monitoring of foundation works - primarily those involving excavation during the early stages of development - in the hope of recording any data supplementary to that already obtained. Ideally this should involve the County Archaeological Officer.
2. The processing and preparation of all the archaeological data recovered as a necessary adjunct to the field projects, and to enable the publication of a definitive report; ideally in the Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. A proposal to this effect has already been submitted to the developers for their consideration and support.

We are grateful to Secure Retirement PLC for their generous support so far towards the necessary archaeological salvage works arising from development of this site, and in particular to their site manager Mr. Barry Riddock for his help and co-operation at all times. The project was directed by Peter Leach and supervised by Jon Sterenberg with the most able support of Laurence Jones, Steven Litherland, Ed Newton; post-graduate students David Best and Quentin Hutchinson; and volunteers Nancy Hollinrake and Hilary Mellor.

P.J. Leach
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