



Leather-working at the site of medieval Cumbergate, Peterborough

by

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with contributions by

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SUMMARY

Excavation adjacent to the covered shopping areas of Queensgate Centre and Westgate Arcade in central Peterborough revealed up to 1.6m of archaeological deposits spanning the late medieval period to the present day. The initial phase dated to the early 15th century and included a boundary wall or building to the north, with an adjacent cobbled surface. Later dumps and pits produced a relatively large assemblage of well-preserved leather attributable to the late 14th to early 15th century, perhaps suggesting a cobbler's workshop in the vicinity. Subsequent post-medieval surfaces were probably associated with the construction and maintenance of Cumbergate. The evidence suggests that the road was created in its documented form after the middle of the 16th century.

INTRODUCTION

Lambert Scott and Innes Architects commissioned Cambridgeshire County Council's Archaeological Field Unit, CAM ARC (now Oxford Archaeology East) on behalf of Norwich Union to carry out an excavation on land opposite The Still Public House and adjacent to the covered shopping areas of Queensgate Centre and Westgate Arcade, Peterborough (NGR TL 5488 2658) (Fig 1). The work took place in late November 2001 and was conducted in advance of the proposed construction of an extension to a shop unit and associated services, following an evaluation earlier that year. Copies of the full grey literature report (Casa-Hatton *et al* 2007) are held by Peterborough's Historic Environment Record.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Spencer Cooper directed both the evaluation and excavation stages assisted by Glenn Bailey and Tony Baker. Thanks are extended to staff of CAM ARC who worked on the site. Specialist advice was provided by Ian Baxter (faunal remains) and Nina Crummy (metalwork). Ceramic dating was provided by Carole Fletcher and Val Fryer assessed the environmental evidence. Finally, thanks go to Ben Robinson (Peterborough City Council Archaeological Service) who monitored the

archaeological work and offered his assistance during the excavation and post-excavation phases of work. This article was edited for publication by Elizabeth Popescu.

TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

The site lies within the historic core of medieval Peterborough, at the former bend of Cumbergate, between Westgate to the north, Exchange Street to the south, Long Causeway to the east and Queen Street to the west (Fig 1). The development area comprised a small rectangular plot measuring approximately 7m by 15m, covered by brick sets and open to the sky, at an approximate height of 8.5m OD.

The geology of the site comprises Cornbrash limestone of the Great Oolite group laid down during the Jurassic period. The upper layer consists of weathered Cornbrash, which takes the form of a light brown limestone rubble (Horton 1989).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The development site lies within the post-conquest 'new town', and preserves part of the corner of Cumbergate where it originally bent eastwards to join Long Causeway. The street does not appear to have moved significantly since John Speed's map of 1610 (Fig 2), although any earlier course is unproven. The road may have been subject to alterations and re-alignments during successive building programmes of the medieval period. Speed's map shows the street lined with houses on the northern, western and eastern sides, although the actual plots are not fully defined. A similar density of buildings is indicated by Thomas Eyre's map of 1721 (Fig 3). Narrow frontage properties along the western and southern sides may have originated as medieval planned units (or burgage style plots). The overall impression of Cumbergate is that the frontage was not densely occupied and this continued to be the case at the time of Hill's map of 1808. By the period of the Enclosure Map of 1821, however, most of the Cumbergate frontage space had been infilled. The first edition of the Ordnance Survey map (1886) shows that substantial building work took place during the middle and later parts of the 19th century.

Cumbergate has been identified as 'the street of the



TALEYNA FLETCHER AND QUITA MOULD



Fig 1 Site location (black), showing previous archaeological investigations (grey)



LEATHER-WORKING AT THE SITE OF MEDIEVAL CUMBERGATE, PETERBOROUGH

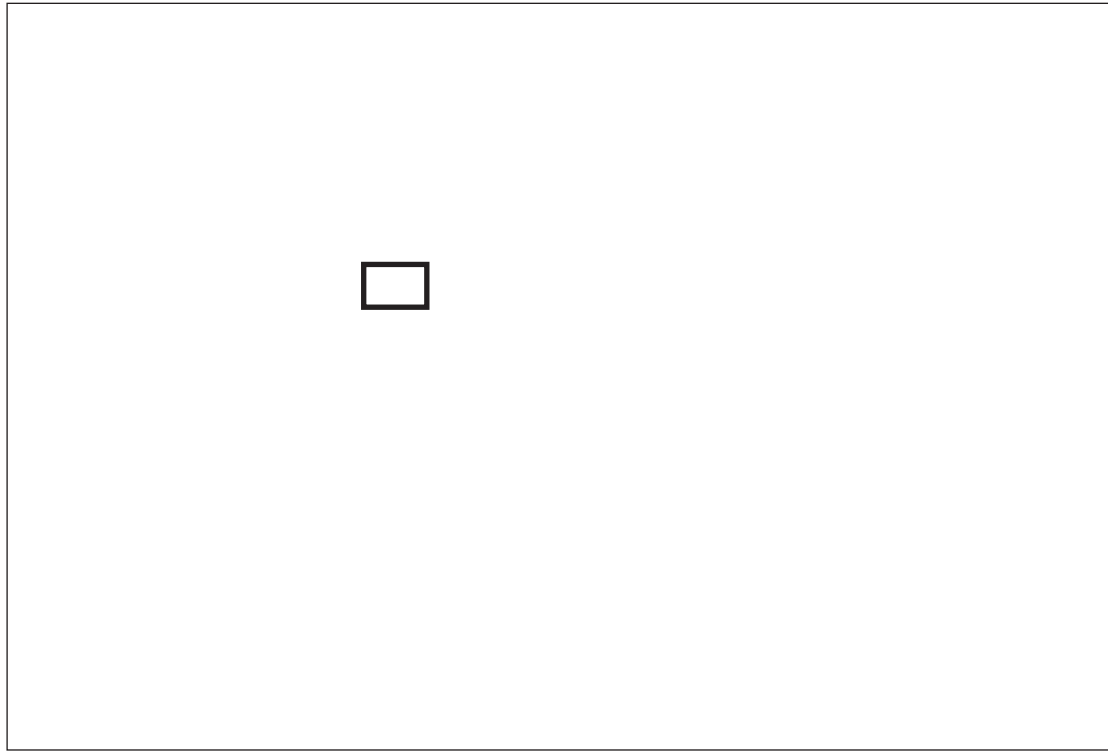


Fig 2 Speed's map of 1610, showing the approximate location of the site (Huntingdon Record Office)

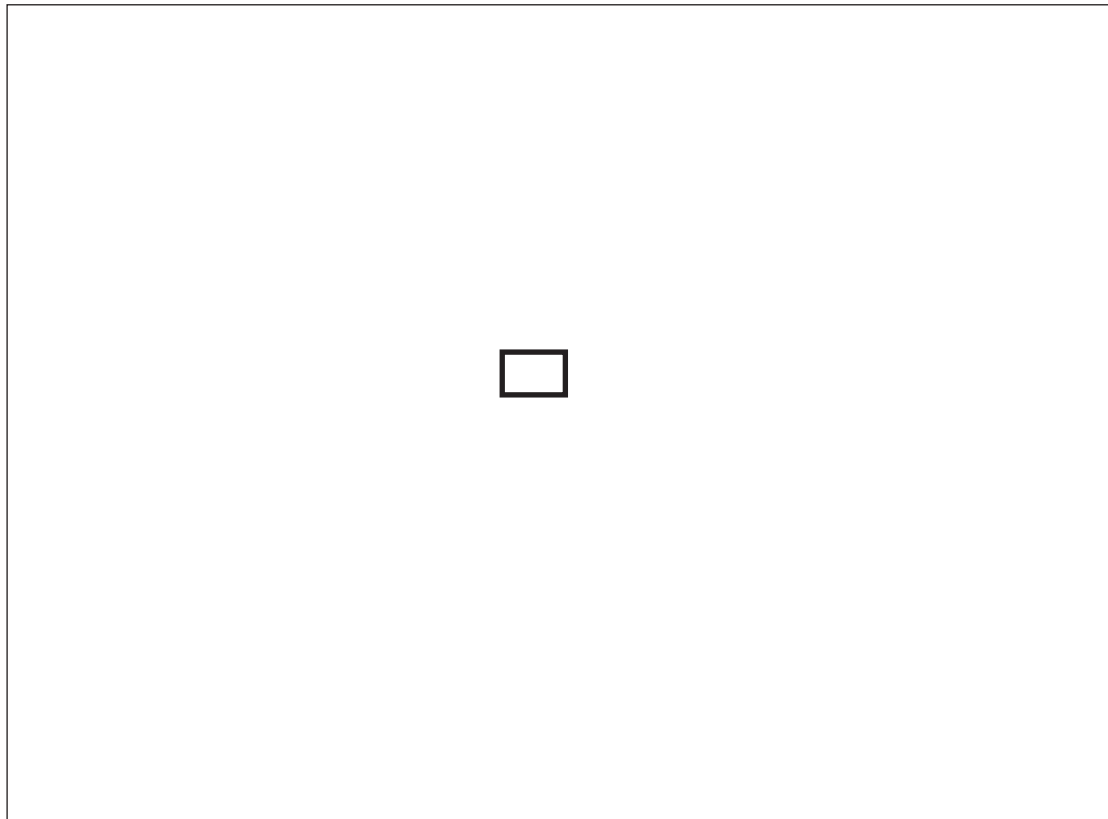


Fig 3 Eyre's map of 1721, showing the approximate location of the site (Huntingdon Record Office)





TALEYNA FLETCHER AND QUITA MOULD



Fig 4 The excavation area

wool combers' (Meadows in Welsh 1994, 4), although neither documentary sources nor previous excavations have indicated that wool processing was actually taking place here. A reference from 1548 to a dunghill that had to be removed from the Cumbergate 'end' (Mellows

1947) illustrates the character of this part of the town. Meadows (in Welsh 1994, 5) notes that this reference, coupled with several others in the 16th century which mention cottage gardens and barns on Cumbergate, gives the impression that this street was not particularly

urban in character. A reference in the Court Roll for 1599 mentions an orchard of a quarter of an acre on land to the western side of the Cumbergate (Mellows and Gifford 1956). The absence of references within the historical records for commercial properties on Cumbergate during the same period is notable.

THE EXCAVATION

METHODOLOGY

The excavated area was a small, roughly rectangular plot measuring approximately 15m by 7m (Fig 4). The site was cleared using a mechanical excavator (mini-digger) with a toothless ditching bucket. The area covered the location of a former evaluation trench in the northern part of the proposed development site (Trench 1, Cooper and Spoerry 2001). Modern surfaces and features were removed under constant archaeological supervision. At the time of the archaeological investigation, modern service trenches underneath the street paving had significantly truncated the archaeological remains, obliterating direct stratigraphic relationships in places, and causing some degree of contamination.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SEQUENCE

The site sequence is summarised in Figure 5 and was phased on the basis of the small pottery assemblage (209 sherds, weighing 4,357g), the character of which is typical of a Peterborough site of 1400-1650. The earliest activity (Phase 1; 1400-1450) consisted of a limestone cobbled surface, 151, lying at *c* 7.30m OD, remnants of which extended across the entire excavation area. Finds recovered from it included sherds of late medieval pottery, late 14th- to 15th-century leather shoe fragments, a copper alloy boss that would have fitted onto a larger metal object, an iron building staple, a nail and animal bone including horse bones. The surface could relate to the earliest phase of Cumbergate or to a courtyard – the latter interpretation is perhaps more likely given the evident absence of the road here in the next two phases. A robbed-out wall, 164, on a north to south alignment and constructed of compacted, dry cornbrash limestone may have formed a boundary or part of the foundations of a building. The robber trench again contained sherds of late medieval pottery.

In Phase 2 (1450-1500) a makeup layer, 150, may have been the result of the demolition of the earlier wall. It contained a fragment of an iron knife blade and a damaged barbed iron arrowhead. A new wall, 120, on a north-east to south-west alignment was constructed above it, with a series of dumps lying to the south. The latter, 104/108/148/158, yielded a large assemblage of well-preserved late 14th- to early 15th-century leather, including many fragments of shoes sufficient to suggest the existence of a cobbler's workshop in the vicinity. Parts from at least ten shoes were found as well as fragments of shoe parts likely to represent a single shoe in each case. Domestic mammal bones were recovered, including horse, cat and chicken. Several iron nails and shank fragments and a part of an iron strap-fitting came from these layers, together with three copper-alloy

objects, a dress pin, a disc and part of a strap-end.

The wall was later thickened to the south (160, Phase 3; 1500-1550) and a series of domestic rubbish pits, 137, 140, 141, 159, was dug along the eastern boundary of the excavation area. These also contained fragments of leather: at least four shoes and the seat cut from a turnshoe sole, as well as a small amount of leather waste. Several iron nails came from one of the pits, which also contained a copper alloy suspension mechanism from an unidentified object. Domestic mammal bones were found, including fallow deer and cat.

Earlier activities were eventually sealed by a series of four distinct phases of surfacing with associated make-up layers (Phase 4; 1550+). Most were cobbled, although one consisted of pitched stones. These surfaces, with an upper level of *c* 8.47m OD, may represent sequences of road surfacing relating to Cumbergate. A copper alloy strap-plate (probably part of a book-fitting) and domestic mammal bones including horse were found.

LEATHER-WORKING

by Quita Mould

Fragments of shoes and smaller pieces of leather indicative of shoe-making were recovered from the early cobbled surface, later rubbish pits and in larger quantities from the dump layers, their deposition spanning a period of approximately 150 years (1400-1550). None of the shoes are complete, although it is estimated that at least seventeen shoes are represented and four shoe styles could be recognised. Table 1 summarises the quantity of leather fragments found by phase.

Table 1: Quantification of leather fragments by phase

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	U/S
Turnshoe sole	2	8	5	-	-
Sole fragment	1	3	3	-	1
Clump repair	1	2	1	1	-
Rand	5	9	1	-	-
One-piece upper	1	3	-	-	-
Upper component	-	4	-	-	-
Quarters	-	2	1	-	-
Heel stiffener	-	1	-	-	-
Upper fragment	-	17	2	-	-
Strap	1	2	-	-	-
Primary waste	-	2	5	-	-
Secondary waste	-	2	2	-	-
Scrap fragment	6	37	2	-	-
TOTAL	17	94	22	1	1

SHOE TYPES

FRONT TIE-LACE FASTENING ANKLE SHOES (Fig 6)

At least four ankle shoes have one-piece uppers of bovine leather, being made principally of a single piece of leather that wrapped around the foot, with insert pieces added where necessary to extend the length and raise the height to fit. One came from Phase 1 (SF 134/2 and 134/4), three others came from a dump layer from Phase 2 (SF 108), along with a fragment likely to be torn from

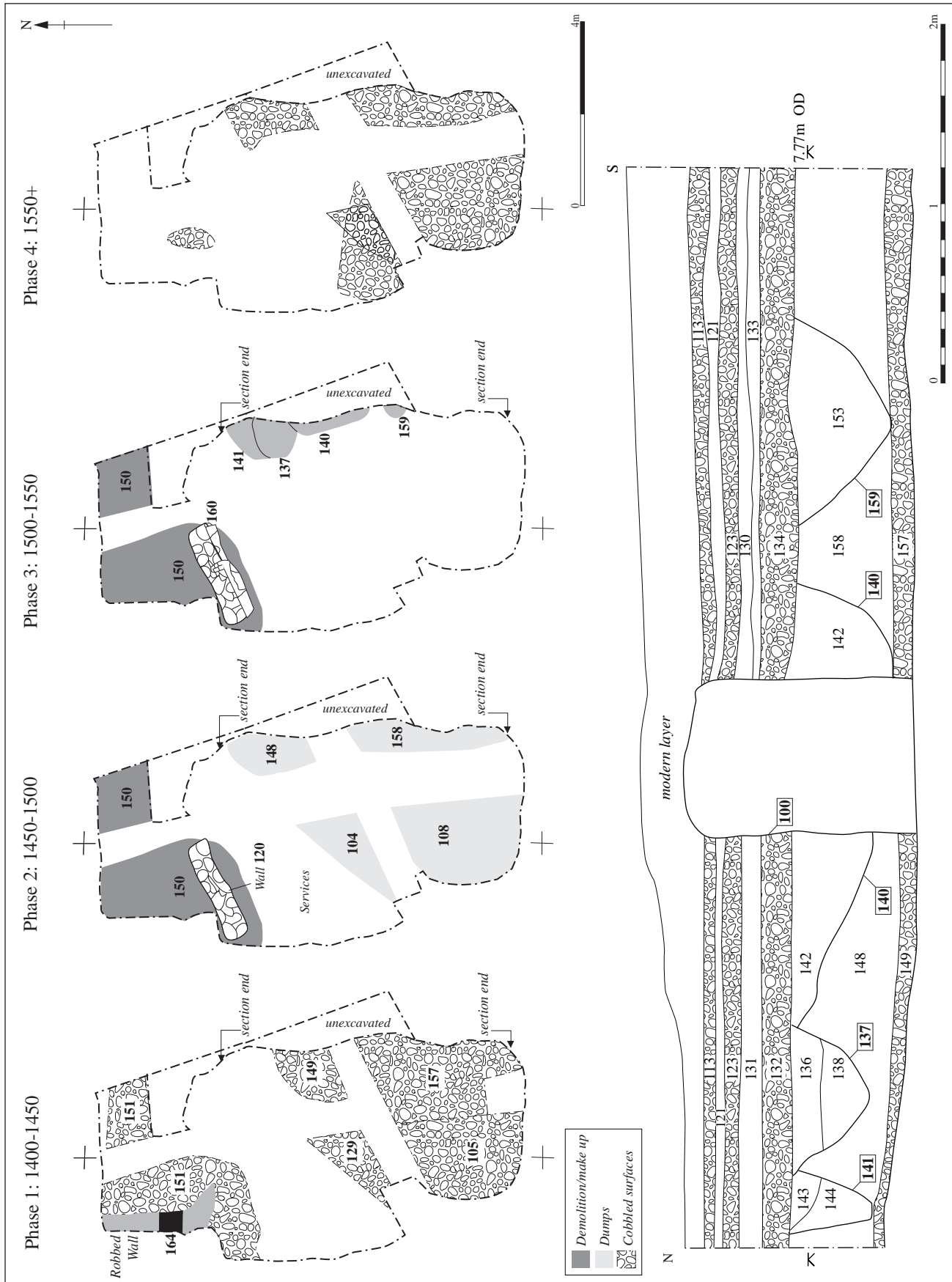


Fig 5 Plan of Phases 1-4

a fifth example. Three ankle shoes from the same dump layer fastened across the instep with tab-ended, divided laces that passed through paired lace holes on one side, out of a matching pair on the other side and were then tied together. Two of the shoes do not have the method of fastening preserved. Stitching indicates that a tongue had been sewn to the central opening of the ankle shoes, and a tongue was found separately. Stitching again indicates that a heel stiffener had been sewn at the centre back of at least three examples. One shoe (SF 124) has its large heel stiffener present. In the City of London this style of shoe was commonly worn during the later 14th century but soon fell from fashion in the early 15th century (Grew and de Neergaard 1988, 41). Elsewhere in the country the contexts from which front tie-lace fastening shoes have been recovered have generally not been sufficiently closely dated to allow this detail to be noted, and they are frequently dated to the late 14th and early 15th century. The style was commonly worn throughout Western Europe and on the continent is dated between the mid 14th and the end of the 15th century (Goubitz *et al* 2001, 191, type 65).

SHOES WITH SEPARATE VAMPS AND QUARTERS (Fig 7A)

Other shoes have separate vamps and one-piece quarters. An example with a short pointed toe from a pit in Phase 3 has a high-throated vamp with short wings and remains of high quarters raised at the centre back (SF 6). The side seams are torn so that the style of fastening, if any, is not preserved. Remains of four other one-piece quarters were found separately in Phases 2 and 3. All are of similar style being raised at centre back, the better preserved examples displaying a distinct peak at one of the side seams. Quarters of this shape are found on low shoes fastening across the instep with a strap and buckle or a divided strap, and higher shoes with a tie-lace fastening, all styles popular in the late 14th and early 15th century.

OTHER STYLES RECOGNISED (Fig 7B and C)

A vamp from a dump layer (Phase 2) has a high, straight throat with a butted seam and comes from a boot (SF 130/2). A small fragment torn from a side-lacing shoe of calfskin was found in the same layer (SF 109/4). Side-lacing footwear was the most popular style during the early 15th century in the City of London (Grew and de Neergaard 1988, 43). In Europe the style was common around the middle of the century (Goubitz *et al* 2001, 175).

OTHER SHOE FRAGMENTS (Figs 8 and 9)

Amongst the fragments of diagnostic shoe types recovered, a number of other pieces were retrieved which reveal something about the people wearing them. Two fragments of a turn-shoe sole were pieced together during the analysis stage (SF 10 and 15). This is part of the sole of a pointed shoe, broken across the tread in a semicircular pattern and if as the result of wear, may be diagnostic of hammer toe. Hammer toe occurs when the foot becomes permanently flexed resulting from the

consistent wearing of shoes that are too narrow and tight (Grew and de Neergaard 1988, 102). While most of the assemblage of identifiable shoes are for adults, a complete two piece sole from a small left turn-shoe was identified (Fig 9, SF 139) as the shoe of a child somewhere between a child's size 9 and size 10 (English sizes) or size 28 or 29 (European sizes).

CATALOGUE OF ILLUSTRATED ITEMS

Figure 6

- SF 108: Front tie-lace fastening ankle shoe, probably right foot. Right side of one-piece upper with lasting margin cut away in some areas and broken off in others, no side seam remains. Right front opening has two pairs of fastening holes, with whip stitching from a lapped seam along the edge to attach a tongue. Leather cattle hide 3mm thick. 272+x150+mm. (148) Phase 2b
- SF 124: Front tie-lace fastening ankle shoe, probably right foot. Right side of one-piece upper with part of front opening remaining, left side torn away. Seam close to centre back with butted edge/flesh seam for 30mm above lasting margin changing to whip stitching above, joining to fragment of left side of upper (SF109/7) and insert (SF109/3). Pair of fastening holes present at front opening, with whip stitching from a lapped seam along the edge, and an insert with divided lace with tab end present. Heel stiffener present at centre back, with corresponding stitching in upper. Leather cattle hide, upper 2.5mm thick, heel stiffener 1.5mm thick. Upper 198+x110mm; insert height 69mm, width 64mm. (148) Phase 2b
- SF 134/2: Disc cut from clump sole repair, at least one tunnel stitch present at the edge on the flesh side. Leather cattle hide 4mm thick. 82x78mm. (157) Phase 1
- SF 134/4: Five narrow strips of leather with cut edges and stitch holes, two of the pieces have a flat profile with grain to flesh stitch holes and may represent lasting margins cut from an upper and discarded. The remaining pieces have a roughly triangular section with grain to flesh stitch holes and surviving grain pattern. The longer piece (97mm long) is 5 to 6mm wide and 5mm high, with stitch holes 2mm wide and 3mm apart. The second piece is 75mm long, 4mm high and 6mm at its widest narrowing to 3mm, with stitch holes 2mm wide and 3 to 4mm apart. The third piece is 42mm long, 6mm wide and 4 to 5mm high. It is possible that these strips of leather are discarded fragments of a rand from a turn-shoe or shoes. (157) Phase 1

Figure 7

- A (SF 6): High-throated shoe, fragmentary. Vamp with short pointed toe, part of butted edge/flesh left side, right side torn away. Stitching above lasting margin from repair. Shallow throat, with line of stitching to attach a strengthening cord on flesh side, and remains of short vamp wings. Part of left



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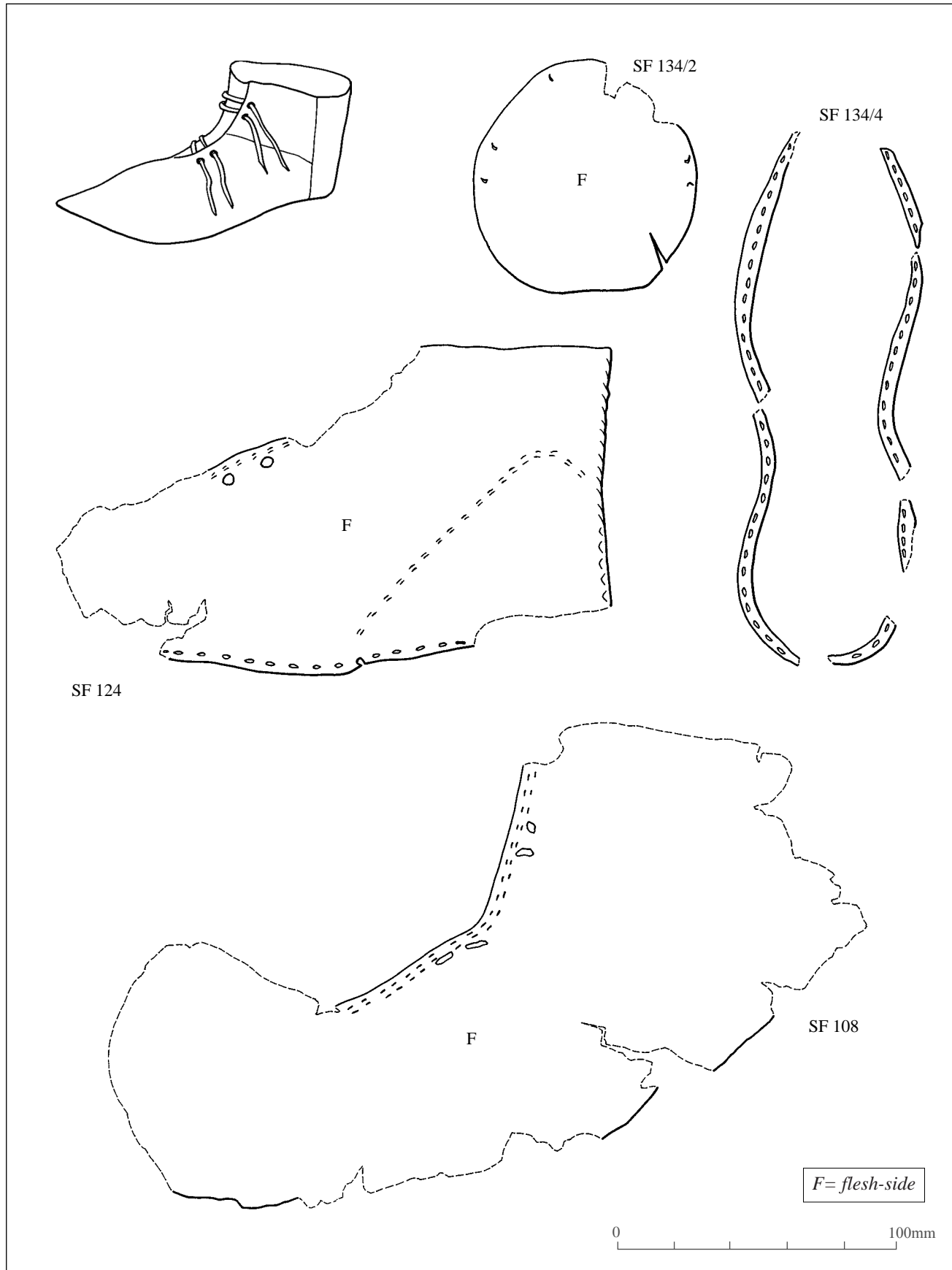


Fig 6 Front tie-laced ankle shoe



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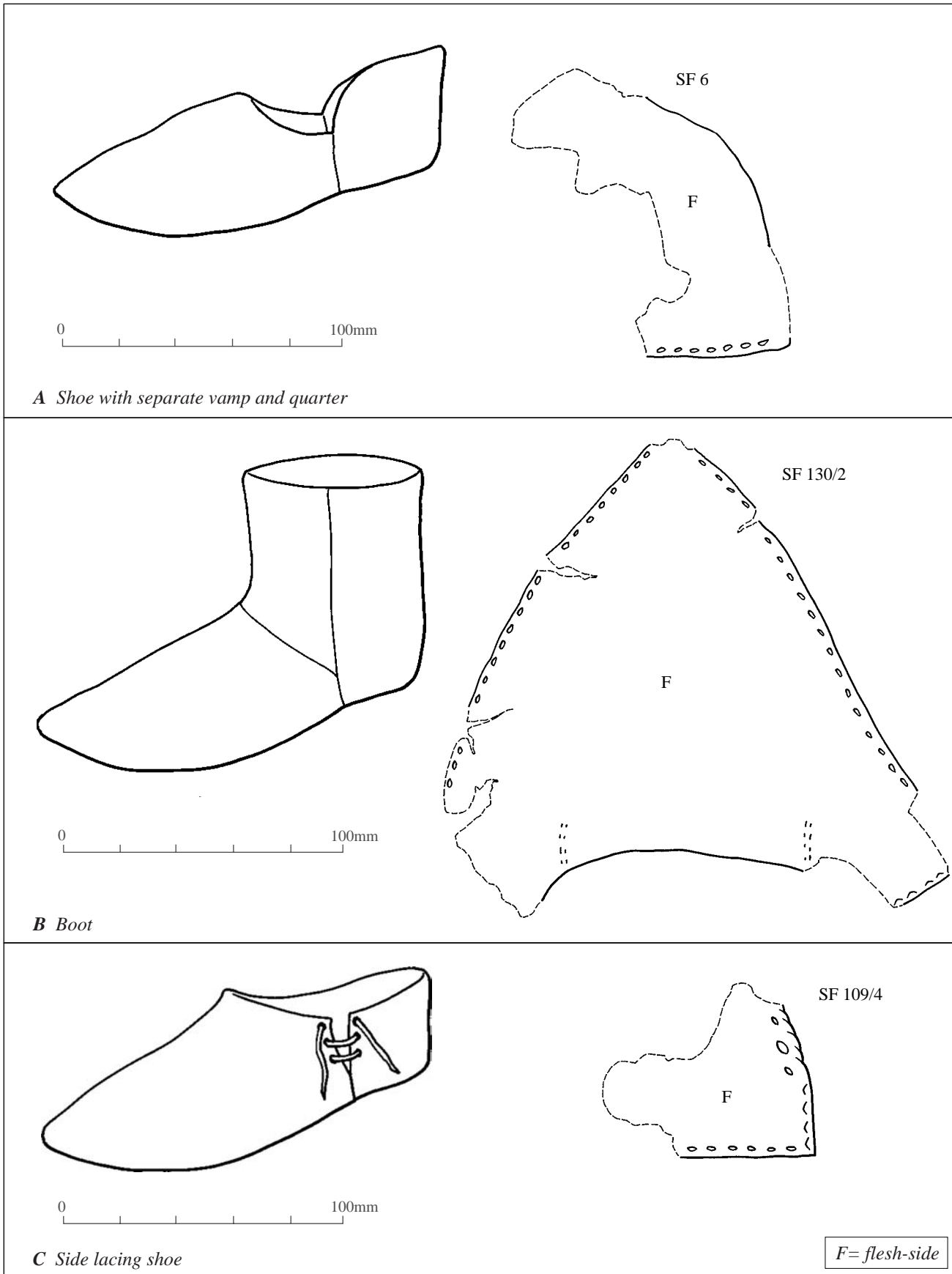


Fig 7 Various shoe types



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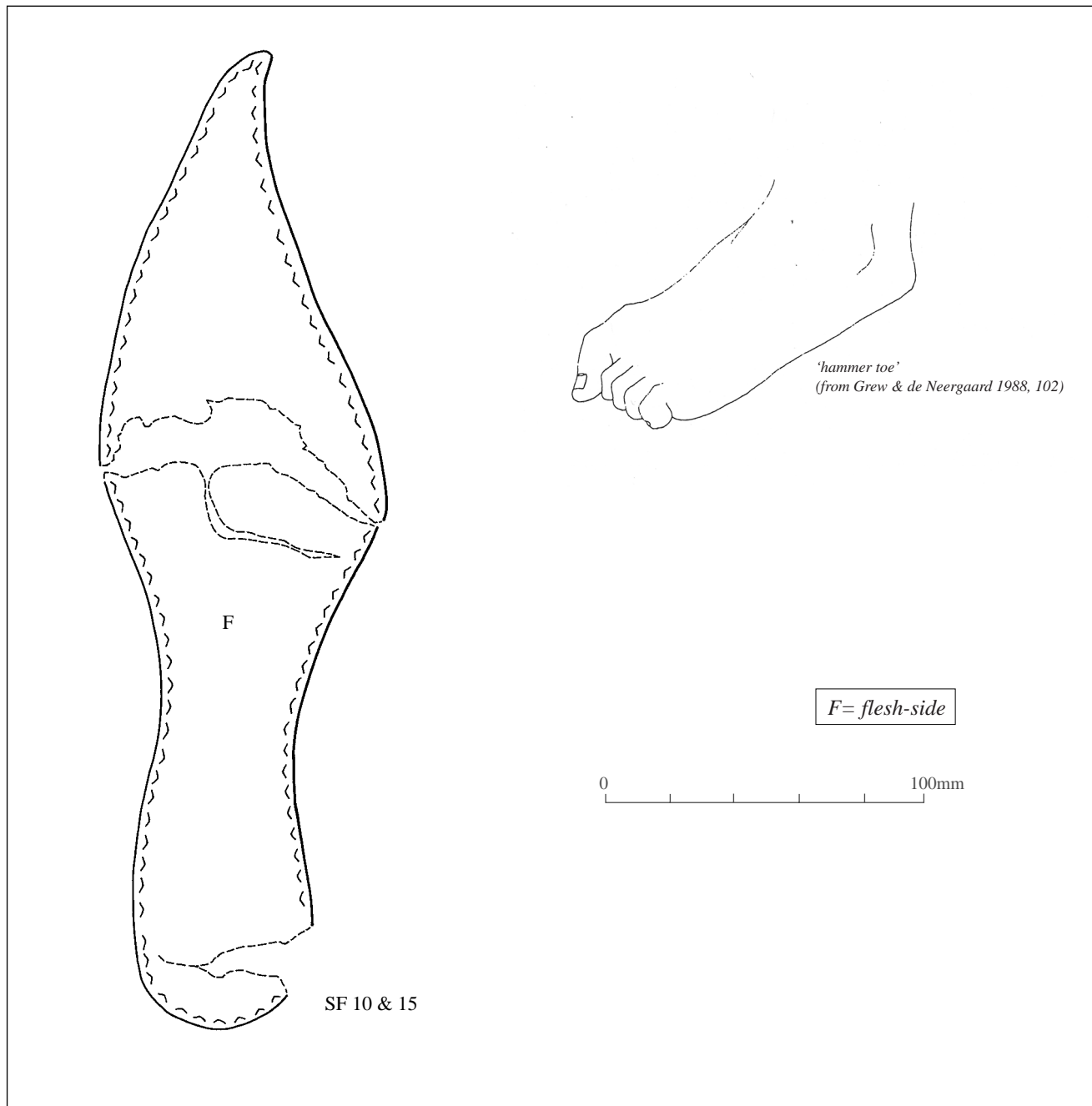


Fig 8 Fragments of a turnshoe sole: the broken tread in a semicircular pattern is diagnostic of 'hammer toe'

side of high quarters present, and other smaller fragments. Adult size. Leather bovine 2mm thick. Vamp length throat to toe 150mm, quarters height 90mm. (10) Phase 2b

B (SF 130/2): Vamp, probably from boot. Short length of lasting margin present, cut away at the toe, broken in other areas. Straight throat with butted edge/flesh seam continuing into side seams at each end. Leather bovine 2mm thick. 185x160+mm. (148) Phase 2b

C (SF 109/4): Side-lacing shoe fragment, with three lace

holes remaining. Part of left side seam with butted edge/flesh seam 20mm above lasting margin and whip stitching along the edge above. Leather calfskin 2mm thick. 60+x70+mm. (148) Phase 2b

Figure 8

SF 10 and 15: Turnshoe sole, right foot, now in two pieces. Long pointed toe, curving outward extending c 70mm. Worn through at tread and seat. Edge/flesh seam, stitch length 8mm. Estimated Adult size 4(37). Length c. 310 mm. (10) Phase 2b

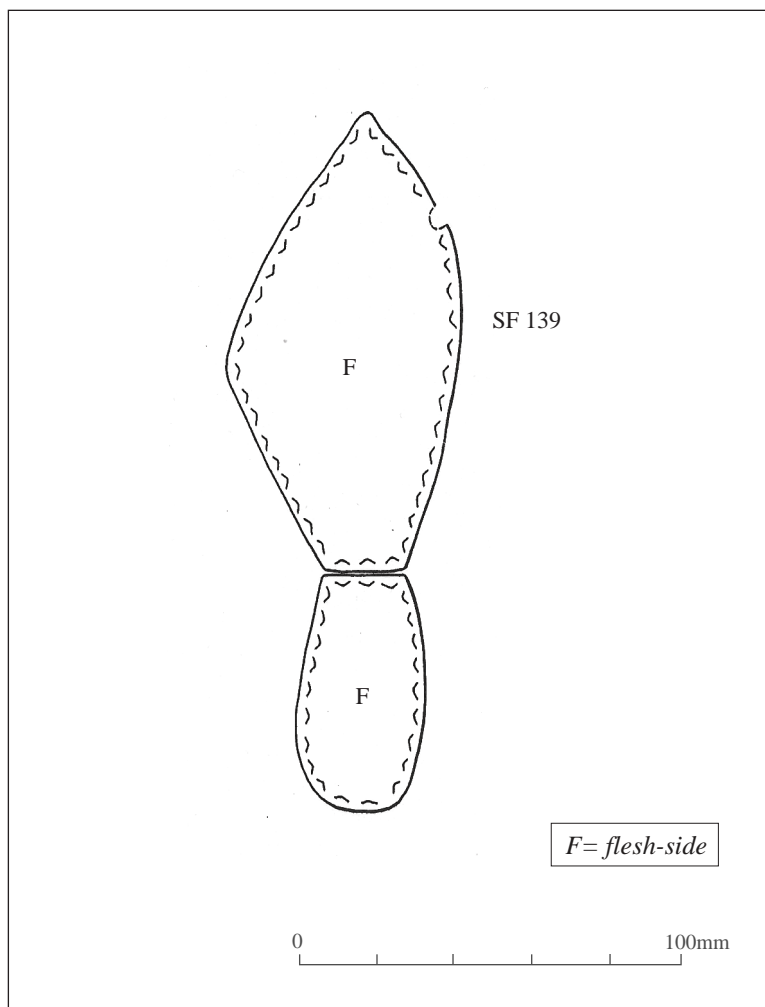


Fig 9 Fragments of a child's shoe

Figure 9

SF 139: Turnshoe two-part sole, left foot. Short pointed toe. Edge/flesh seam, stitch length 6mm. Pieces of matching rand 6mm wide (SF134/3). Child size 11(29). Length 190mm. (157) Phase 1

SKINNING

The animal bones recovered from the site largely consist of refuse from butchery and food waste, although the cat bones may represent waste from small scale skinning activities. During the medieval period cats were not generally kept as pets and there was a considerable trade in cat skins, which were also exported to the continent (Luff and Moreno García 1995).

DISCUSSION

The available evidence suggests an early 15th-century date for the earliest phase of activity on the subject site, in contrast with the results from a previous excavation at The Still (Spoerry and Hinman 1998). This site, which is located only 5m to the west, produced evidence for activity as early as the 11th century, also suggesting a

12th- or 13th-century origin for Cumbergate. Remains at The Still were mainly derived from areas between properties located on the edge of the medieval settlement. At least four properties fronting onto Cumbergate and Westgate were recorded, which dated to the early part of the 13th century. Earlier, pre-mid 12th century, activity was represented by quarrying close to the street frontage at the Cumbergate end of the site. Additionally, an early-mid 13th-century zone of quarrying was observed at the rear of the later Westgate properties. The quarries along both street frontages contained pre-1150 pottery and may thus have had an earlier origin. Their location and dating tend to support the existence of the street lines in approximately their later positions, prior to the definition of the individual 'burgage plot' style properties from the middle of the 13th century along Westgate and, possibly, along Cumbergate (Spoerry and Hinman 1998, 92 ff).

It now appears that Cumbergate, as a minor L-shaped road, is post-medieval. In the absence of more conclusive evidence, it is tempting to combine the results from both this excavation and that at The Still and suggest the possibility that in medieval times Cumbergate was a narrower road, aligned north to south and either terminating abruptly without turning eastwards, or continuing northwards to intersect the projected line of

Back Lane and Westgate (Fig 1). Both interpretations would be consistent with the presence of a medieval street frontage at The Still accounting, at the same time, for the absence of the road itself 5m further to the east. To support the latter suggestion, a boundary marked on Speed's Map of 1610 and stretching in a northerly direction from the 'dog-leg' corner of Cumbergate to Westgate might have marked a minor lane across the fields (Fig 2). The cartographic evidence would be consistent with the proposed post-1550/pre-1600 date for the creation of Cumbergate. The excavation at The Still revealed that during the period 1500-1600 (Phase 6) the backyard plots of the buildings along the Westgate frontage were used for rubbish disposal, and very little activity was recorded at the Cumbergate end, indicative of partial contraction. However, after 1600 the Westgate and Cumbergate properties were rebuilt whereas the centre of the site, which, by then, had become a garden, was not re-developed until the 19th century. It is tempting to suggest that the change in land use in the central part of the site at The Still was due to the 're'-alignment of Cumbergate in its present form and the 'decline' of the postulated north to south aligned route linking-up Cumbergate and Westgate further north.

Another significant aspect of the recent work is the discovery of a significant group of leather footwear. The most commonly found shoe styles at Queensgate – the front tie-lace fastening ankle shoe and the side-lacing shoe – are styles that have been found in the well-dated waterfront deposits in the City of London in late 14th- and early 15th-century contexts (Grew and de Neergaard 1988). A small group of leather was found close by at Nos 25/26 Long Causeway, Peterborough in 1995 (LCW95 excavated by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, Fig 1). Amongst this material, a small amount of apparently contemporary footwear, including a side-lacing shoe, was found in a ditch (Mould 1995). Until recently relatively little was known about 15th-century leatherwork in this country. With the exception of the early/mid 15th-century assemblages from the City of London waterfront sites few groups were available for study. Currently two large and well-dated groups of mid-late 15th-century date, one from London and the other from Coventry, are being studied to which the Queensgate assemblage may be compared. The Queensgate group does not include features that are characteristic of this mid and late 15th-century material. The majority of the leather from Queensgate comes from rubbish deposits securely dated to AD 1450-1500. On present knowledge, it would seem that the leather was thrown away at the beginning of that fifty-year period. It is possible that the shoe styles found in the Queensgate group may have remained popular, particularly in the provinces, for much of the 15th century. The lack of butchery waste from goat, deer or calf, together with the absence of tanning pits on or close to the site, would

suggest that this activity was taking place elsewhere and that the hides were brought to the site for small-scale shoe-making and repairs. Once the hides were purchased and prepared by the shoemaker they would be laid out flat and the patterns and cuts planned to make the most of the material and avoid any unnecessary wastage (Grew and de Neergaard 1988, 46).

CONCLUSIONS

The new evidence suggests that Cumbergate was created in its mapped L-shaped form after *c* 1550. Although this was a relatively small excavation, the site has produced important evidence of shoe manufacture in this part of Peterborough. Overall the results suggest that, despite large-scale disturbance caused by the construction of Queensgate Shopping Centre nearby, pockets of preserved stratified archaeology survive within the Cumbergate area.

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