

Book Review

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Excavations on Medieval Sites in Milton Keynes 1972 - 1980

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This, the last of the monograph series produced by the now defunct Milton Keynes (Development Corporation) Archaeology Unit, is generally a handsome, clearly presented large format report. Or rather, a series of individual reports of excavations and watching briefs carried out by the unit in the area of the city of Milton Keynes over a period of eight or so years.

The volume starts in a promising way, with a list of the various sites, the contents of the individual reports, the reports' illustrations, and a location map showing the spread of sites throughout the city. The separate reports follow, all sections in the same order as far as the material will allow, which lends coherence to the reports overall. Where possible, there is an introduction giving a brief topographical placing which includes geology and relationship to contemporary trading routes. It gives the timing and circumstances of the project, always a useful insight into the restrictions placed on the excavators, and therefore their chosen strategy and methodology. This is followed by acknowledgements to the archaeological team and others associated with the project. The historical background follows, when relevant documentation is available. This is useful for placing the sites into their historical context and understanding the significance of the findings, but excavation and survey results tend to appear here instead of in the discussion. Further topographical information sometimes follows as a separate section rather than being subsumed within the introduction. This is usually the case where the investigations are centred on earthwork sites, and is necessary in order to understand the strategy and results of trial trenches and larger excavations.

The main meat is divided into two parts: structural evidence and finds. The structural evidence is clearly presented in terms of good quality simple drawings with sufficient detail to tell the story. A description of the earthworks and/or excavation follows the introductory and historical sections. The stratigraphic descriptions of the excavations are reasonably concise, but tend to mix straight observations and documentary evidence with interpretation and dating. There is no

formal summary and no overall conclusions, these being subsumed within a general introduction and framework to the structural evidence. Given the nature of the excavations this works well, the descriptions of the buildings themselves being well balanced, sufficient to understand the structure without being swamped with unnecessary detail. The drawings are of high quality and economic, complimenting the text well. The plates are well chosen but suffer from the paper on which they are printed, ending up rather greyer than one suspects the negatives could deliver, not doing what looks clean, competent excavation, justice. There is one minor quibble: as with many excavation reports one wonders whether some of the detailed descriptions of pit fills and the like would be better left to the archive.

Publication of the finds follows the improved modern format of being published according to activity and function rather than material. The drawings are generally of excellent quality, though their scale might be considered extravagant. Each report has its own separate finds section. Again, this works reasonably well, but the question must be asked whether there might have been a better way of presenting the material so that it served both the individual excavations and examined the pattern of material culture across the whole city. One or two assemblages are shown, mainly of ceramics, but one has to rely mostly upon the structural descriptions to get an idea of the associated finds. The editor might have eradicated some of the spelling errors. It would have been helpful to have had the site name in question printed on the page; the structural illustrations are generally labelled with the site name, but not the finds. There is very little environmental material, but this is a symptom of the age of the excavation. There is a full, and useful, bibliography.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the volume is that there has been no attempt at synthesis. A dozen medieval sites have been examined across the city, but no attempt has been made to draw out any conclusions about any aspect. Perhaps this was a considered and deliberate omission, which should have been flagged for the reader. It may have simply been lack of time or funding, this being the penultimate product of the Milton Keynes Archaeology Unit before its untimely and much lamented demise. On the whole, the criticisms are mere quibbles, the volume representing good professional standards from one of the better local units.