

EXCAVATIONS IN THE NORTHERN QUARTER OF MEDIEVAL COVENTRY

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COVENTRY, LAMB STREET AND BISHOP STREET (SP 33270 79350) – Following an initial programme of archaeological evaluation trenching that confirmed the presence of extensive and significant below-ground remains across the site of the former Coventry Evening Telegraph complex, full excavation of five areas was carried out by Salford Archaeology between January and March 2019.³ The excavation site lay in the northern part of Coventry city centre, comprising an area of 4250 m² bounded by Lamb Street, Bishop Street, Corporation Street and Chapel Street (Fig 1). The site is important because of its relative proximity to the medieval town defences and its positioning along one of the main thoroughfares leading to the northernmost gate; scope therefore existed to gain fuller insight into medieval sequencing within the city's old northern quarter.

Post-Conquest Coventry was focused around a castle that was established in the late 11th century; the town expanded rapidly thereafter, emerging as a major centre for the wool and cloth trade. While a town ditch was created in the early 13th century, construction work began on the substantial city walls in 1356.⁴ With 12 gates and 20 towers, these defences were regarded as the most impressive in the county, befitting of Coventry's perceived status as the principal city of the Midlands and the fourth largest in England.⁵

The excavation area lay c 100m from the site of Bishop Gate and a similar distance from the Old Grammar School (a former medieval ecclesiastical building). Besides a single worked flint of late Mesolithic/early Neolithic date and a sherd of Roman pottery (both recovered from post-Conquest deposits), the archaeological record was dominated by remains deriving from seemingly continuous site activity between the late 11th century and the 17th. Three broad phases of activity were recognised across this timespan, plus two later phases representing occupation during the 18th and 19th centuries, and redevelopment in the 20th century.

Phase 1 (late 11th to late 13th century) (Fig 2)

Excavation close to the Bishop Street frontage (Area 4) revealed clusters of intercutting pits and postholes, whose dating was based largely on the ceramic assemblage, and specifically the presence of Coventry A and D wares, and Chilvers Coton A and B wares.⁶ One of the earliest of these pits [036] was cut into the natural geology but had been backfilled and covered by a sequence of thin layers containing much charcoal and iron-working debris, plus ceramic finds dating to c 1250–1300. Seemingly associated with this industrial activity was a large pit [021] featuring numerous lenses of burnt material along with an assemblage of animal bones and 88 fragments of pottery with a date range spanning the late 11th to the late 13th/early 14th centuries. Close by to the north were the remains of a small, stone-built structure [099], set into a foundation trench containing 12th- and 13th-century sherds; the structure was later infilled with fragmented tile.

Several large pits were discovered to the rear of the Bishop Street frontage, with some containing significant groups of pottery and other artefacts, especially pits [1190] and [1231] (Area 1), [2336] in Area 2, [3173] in Area 3 and [3134] in Area 5. The remnants of a NE-SW-aligned ditch [2100] perhaps formed a boundary between two plots, although very little of this feature survived.

Phase 2 (14th to mid-16th century) (Fig 3)

The second broad phase of activity covers c 1300–1550 and was of a density to indicate that this part of Coventry began to flourish during the 14th century, perhaps stimulated by the construction of the city walls.

Most prominent were the remains of several substantial structures revealed close to the Bishop Street frontage (Area 4), including evidence for three stone-built cellars. The fabric of the southern cellar [004]

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³ Detailed analysis of the dataset is ongoing, although the post-excavation assessment report is available online: OASIS reference centrefo4-384160.

⁴ Creighton and Higham 2005: 32.

⁵ Soden 2005: 7-8.

⁶ The pottery assemblage was examined by Stephanie Rátkai, whose input is gratefully acknowledged.

comprised squared pink sandstone blocks laid in random coursing, with occasional tile-packing between courses in the northern wall. The cellar had evidently been subject to some alteration and repairs during the 17th and 18th centuries, although the medieval fabric survived to a maximum height of 2 m. Remnants of sandstone walls [017] and [042], sited immediately to the north, may have represented the vestiges of another cellar, while cellar [136] further north again had been largely destroyed by a later wall, although its surviving fabric included finely worked masonry that formed the springing for a vaulted ceiling. Close parallels to this structure can be drawn from the undercrofts at Coventry's Herbert Art Gallery, which have been assigned to the 14th century, and from remains uncovered during excavations on Bayley Lane in 2005–06.⁷

Excavation between these northerly cellars revealed a stone-built well [152], which cut the Phase 1 structure [099]. Several pits and postholes lay either side of this well: the sizeable pit [115] contained numerous fragments of animal bone and tile; and a short distance to the west in Area 5, a group of large pits [3140], [3145] and [3157] was revealed whose linear alignment may signify that they had marked a plot boundary, set c 7 m south of the Phase 1 ditch [2100].

To the west, a concentration of large pits was also encountered in Areas 1 and 2, with most containing pottery of date range spanning the 13th and 14th centuries. The largest of these was pit [1135], measuring 3.5 x 2.5 m, which featured a complex sequence of fills. Several sherds recovered from pit [2125] retained traces of what may be vermilion, a red pigment used in the production of illuminated manuscripts; a large quantity of tile, animal bones and part of a crucible that had been used for copper-alloy working derived from the same pit. Other notable finds included a jetton of probable 15th-century date (Fig 4) from pit [2148], a complete silver penny of Henry VI dating to 1430–31, and part of a copper-alloy sieve from pit [2267]. These pits appeared to have been associated with several small, stone-built structures [2242], [2233] and [2280], potentially related to craftworking or small-scale industrial activity. The vestiges of a more substantial stone-built foundations [3112] and [3183] were revealed in Area 3 to the south; while too little survived to enable any reliable interpretation, wall [3112] appeared to enclose a group of postholes, intercutting pits and a linear gully.

Discussion

Coventry has benefitted from numerous archaeological excavations over the past 20 years, although most of these have examined the central and southern parts of the historic city centre, which appear to have been populated by prosperous merchants. The excavations on Lamb Street, however, have provided a valuable insight into the late medieval development of the northern part of the city, which was hitherto quite poorly represented in the archaeological record. The data recovered from the excavation suggest that this zone was sparsely populated before the 12th century, but experienced sustained growth between the 13th and 15th centuries.

The character of the excavated features, combined with evidence from the large assemblage of pottery (1,544 sherds with a combined weight of 44.467 kg), point to industrial activity being at the heart of the intensive occupation of the site during the later medieval period. A great deal of sooting, often very heavy, was noted on numerous sherds of bowls and jars, together with thick internal deposits that possibly derived from the use of urine, hinting at cloth finishing or tanning. A small number of possible wasters from pottery production were also identified among the material recovered from Areas 1 and 2; these included fragments of Cistercian ware, blackware and late medieval oxidised ware, which could all be of a 16th-century date. The finds assemblage also included 1414 fragments of tile; noticeably, more than 4% of the tile fragments from Phase 2 deposits were heavily sooted, indicative of use in a pottery kiln, while some had splashes of glaze suggesting use as shelves during the firing of glazed vessels.⁸ In addition, a small quantity of kiln waste was recovered, some fragments exhibiting evidence of green glaze. A particular concentration of this material lay in the fill of gully [2120], which also contained probable smithing hearth cakes, while small pieces of tap slags indicative of bloomery iron smelting were present in pit [3117].

Detailed analysis of the dataset generated from the excavation is in progress. It is anticipated that the results of this analytical work will be submitted for publication in 2021–22.

Bibliography

⁷ See Colls and Hancox 2008.

⁸ The tile was examined by Phil Mills, who is gratefully acknowledged.

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Illustrations

Figure 1: *Location plan of the Lamb Street excavations in Coventry* (Plan copyright Salford Archaeology)

Figure 2: *Lamb Street, Coventry: Plan of the Phase 1 features (late 11th – late 13th century)* (Plan copyright Salford Archaeology)

Figure 3: *Lamb Street, Coventry: Plan of the Phase 2 features (14th – mid-16th century)* (Plan copyright Salford Archaeology)

Figure 4: *Lamb Street, Coventry: 15th-century jetton* (Photo: Samantha Rowe, Salford Archaeology)