

Sampling a Profile of Town Soil-Accumulation: 57 East St. Helen's Street, Abingdon

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IN April 1977, during the course of restoration of No. 57 East St. Helen's Street, the builder proposed to dig a deep soakway pit in the garden and we (R.T., R.W.) undertook the work to pursue our own interests. Nearly 2 m. of soil was excavated to reach the natural gravel. FIG. 1a shows the southern section of the pit, which respected a drainpipe in a modern trench (F1). The upper level then consisted of post-medieval accumulation (F2) including stones perhaps for a small retaining garden wall. Below an irregular layer of mortar and brick rubble (F3) was the edge of a rubbish or cess pit with distinct alternating soil layers of black or greenish colour. This pit cut through about 1 m. of dark loamy soil (F5) and a lower layer of brown gravelly soil (F6) over a few cm. of yellow silty-clay bearing traces of burning and which capped the natural gravel. At the north western edge of the soakway pit, 75 cm. from the drawn section, was the edge of a rounded feature (F7) cutting 20 cm. into the gravel and at least 30 cm. in length or diameter.

During the digging, soil samples were taken from F5 and F6 to compare sieving results using screens of two different meshes (approx. 6 mm. and 2.5 mm. square). After the pit had been dug it was thought that feature interpretation would be difficult unless controlled sampling of the section was done. Single bucketfuls of soil samples were taken at 12 cm. intervals down the section, excepting the uppermost levels and the rubble spread. The sampling column is depicted in FIG 1a. These samples were sieved with 6 mm. mesh. In all, 23 samples, including handpicked debris, were washed, sorted and assigned random numbers before the ceramics were given to Roger Thomas to identify.

Dating of the sherds gave the 5 categories in FIG. 1b. These cover the 1st-2nd, 3rd-4th, c. 12th, 13th-15th and 18th-19th-centuries. Some of the early Roman sherds were akin to Iron Age material, but no positively earlier ceramics were identified. Saxon wares were absent. The total numbers of pot and bone fragments for each column sample are depicted in FIG. 1c.

The sampling column shows upward stratigraphic trends in F5 of diminishing quantities of Roman pot and increasing quantities first of early then of late medieval pot. The ceramics of pit F4 are 17th-century,² and the uppermost samples contained later post-medieval ceramics and occasional medieval sherds.

Bone and shell from the sieving were mainly small unidentifiable fragments. Sheep, pig, cattle, domestic fowl and oyster occurred as expected. Rabbit bones were found at post-medieval levels (also F4), fish bones in features (4) 5 and 6, and

¹ Bob Wilson is responsible for the general account, Roger Thomas has provided data on the ceramics and Alwyne Wheeler has reported on the fish bones. Wendy Lee (Page) drew Fig. 1. We are grateful to Mr. and Mrs. P. Ibbotson for the opportunity to excavate.

² M. Parrington, personal communication.

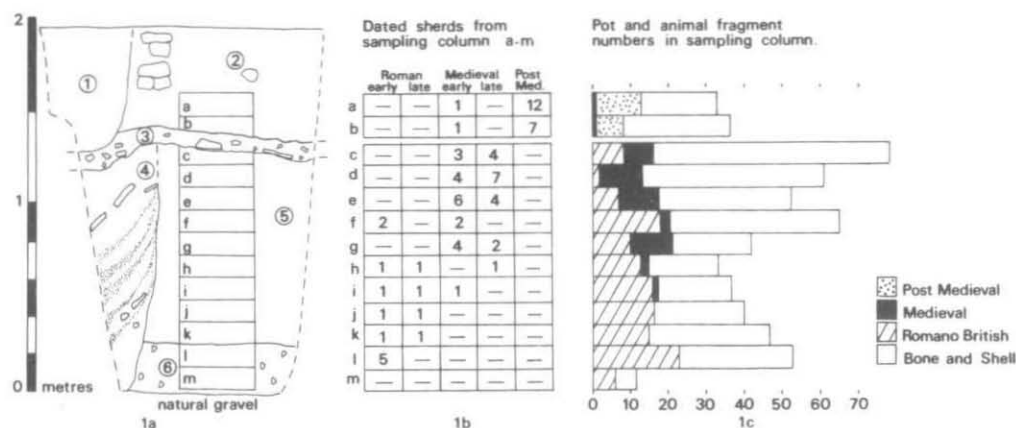


Fig. 1

house mouse bones in F6. It is possible that the fish and mouse bones are intrusive elements in the Roman level, but well-sealed fish bones occurred at Barton Court Farm Villa,³ and some authorities believe that the house-mouse was introduced to Britain during the Iron Age.⁴

A lead token from F5, probably 12th–15th-century but of unknown origin, is matched by finds elsewhere in Abingdon and Banbury.⁵

F6 is interpreted as an early Roman level where an originally red-brown soil (typical of local early prehistoric features and some adjacent farmland) became mixed with the underlying gravel from nearby features, e.g. F7, which seems to be part of a large post-hole or shallow trench of early Roman date. The sampling column indicates that artifacts, including lumps of daub, are concentrated at the upper level of F6.

In F5 the pot and bone distribution and the presence of lumps of charcoal and daub in the upper levels shows that this feature was less homogeneous than it appeared. The quantities of coarse gravel seemed to increase in the upper levels, too, and the bulk of deposition, including redeposition, seems to have occurred during the medieval period. However, the soil colour indicates charcoal and organic deposition throughout, perhaps initially on soil similar to F6. Any more definite previous stratification at the Roman level and above could have been destroyed by later arable cultivation; no Saxon wares were found.

The immediate post-medieval period was scarcely represented, perhaps because of soil removal from this spot. The 17th-century pit contained at least 11 horn cores, including one longhorn, in the base of the excavated portion—a useful record of cattle breeds and horn removal for working, the cores being chopped off the skulls from the latero-ventral side. Since the rubble layer F3 overlies the pit and is covered by 18th–19th-century deposition, it is possible that the rubble is construction rather

³ A. Wheeler, unpublished report, Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit, Oxford.

⁴ C. Lever, *Naturalised animals of the British Isles* (London, 1977), 77.

⁵ N. J. Mayhew, personal communication, and 1976 'Numismata' in K. A. Rodwell, 'Excavations on the site of Banbury Castle 1973–4', *Oxoniensia*, xli, 144 1–3.

than destruction debris from the building of the house, or at least its façade, in 1732 as its wall plaque states.⁶

Coal and several different limestones in the 18th- and 19th-century sievings indicate further changes in the local post-medieval economy; glass, on the other hand, appears from late medieval times on. A fragment of glass with linear decoration from F4 is probably post-medieval in date, and may be from a domestic or ecclesiastical building.⁷

SUMMARY

The sampling gives a record of Romano-British occupation, more for the early period (38 sherds) than the late (5 sherds), followed by a decline in objects found until medieval remains indicate town growth from around the 12th-century onwards. This is the first time that a soil profile in the old town has been systematically sampled and it provides useful confirmation of other archaeological and documentary evidence of the settlement pattern.

THE FISH BONES. By ALWYNE WHEELER, British Museum (Natural History)

Single bucketfuls of soil from three deposits were wet sieved using a screen mesh of 2.5 mm. square. Most identifications in TABLE I were of vertebrae but included a dermal denticle or buckler of a ray and an otic capsule of a sprat.

TABLE I
FISH BONE FREQUENCY

	Romano-British (unsealed deposit)	Medieval 12th-15th-century	Post Medieval 17th-century
Eel	4	4	2
<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>			
Pike	1	2	-
<i>Esox lucius</i>			
Thornback ray	-	1	-
<i>Raja clavata</i>			
Sprat	-	1	-
<i>Sprattus sprattus</i>			
Cod	-	1	-
<i>Gadus morhua</i>			
Mackerel	-	1	-
<i>Scomber scombrus</i>			
Flounder	-	-	1 + ?1
<i>Platichthys flesus</i>			

Discussion

Some points of interest emerge from the identified bones. As with the remains spanning Romano-British to Saxon periods at Barton Court Farm, the eel, *Anguilla anguilla* is present in all samples. This is an interesting confirmation of the importance of this species in the diet of the inhabitants of Abingdon, and illustrates the continuity of eel fishing in the Middle Thames through to historical times. The pike, *Esox lucius*, also occurs in the Saxon periods as well as in the medieval remains

⁶ P. S. Spokes, 'Some notes on the domestic architecture of Abingdon, Berks'. *Berks Archaeol. Jnl.*, lxiii (1960), 1-19.

⁷ P. Newton, personal communication.

discussed here. There is little doubt that it, like the eel, was captured in the Thames or its backwaters close to Abingdon.

The medieval samples, however, also contain marine species which show that by this period there existed a trade with coastal fishing communities, presumably along the Thames although land carriage by pack-horse cannot be ruled out. Although few individual bones were identified, the species list is significant, and contains the roker or thornback ray, *Raja clavata*, sprat, *Sprattus sprattus*, cod, *Gadus morhua*, and mackerel, *Scomber scombrus*. The presence of remains of these four species suggests that there were a number of sea fish available for food. The presence of mackerel, which spoils quickly due to the oily nature of its flesh, strongly indicates that the fish were preserved in some way, probably salted and dried, or smoked. On account of the distance of Abingdon from the sea it seems very probable that all four sea fish would have been imported as salted fish. Although the material is too sparse to draw any far-reaching conclusion it may be significant that, with the exception of the sprat, no head bones of marine fishes were recognised. This would be in agreement with the suggestion that salted fish were involved as it is usual to decapitate and gut fish for salting and drying. The exception, the sprat, is small and may have been salted or smoked whole (as it is today).

The occurrence of the flounder, *Platichthys flesus*, suggests that some estuarine fishing was involved (such as, for example, in the mouth of the Thames) in the supply of fish in the post-medieval period; this also is not inconsistent for the medieval period. Although the flounder penetrates far upstream into freshwater, and Abingdon may have been beyond its normal range in the Thames, this is not known for certain. The fish represented may have been captured in the Thames below Abingdon. The presence of marine fishes in these samples sets a period on the commencement of trade with the coast for food fish and the cessation of total reliance on Thames fishes of the Saxon period.

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