

# Trade, Industry and Domestic Activity at the Old Clothing Factory Site, Abingdon

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## SUMMARY

*Excavations have helped to define the western and southern limits of Romano-British and medieval settlement in Abingdon adjacent to St. Helen's church. Location of a large medieval ditch helps to define property boundaries. Dumped trade or industrial refuse of foot bones of sheep contributed to the squalid wasteland documented for the medieval period. Half of the deposition, however, belonged to intense post-medieval activity associated with a series of buildings starting in the late 16th century, including an early 19th-century hemp and linen flax factory, and culminating in the massive mid 19th- to mid 20th-century Clothing Factory.*

On the W. side of West St. Helens Street, Abingdon, stood the now demolished Clothing Factory. During 1977 and 1978 a small part of this large property was excavated by the Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society. The trench lay adjacent to the graveyard of St. Helens church and to the Twitty Almshouses (Fig. 1). This site is now occupied by the Church Centre and Vicarage of St. Helen's, while modern housing covers the rest of the Clothing Factory property.

Man-made deposits in the main excavation trench, excluding features cut through the underlying natural, extended to a depth of 2.01 m. below present ground level (Fig. 2). Half or more of this deposition was post-medieval.

The oldest deposit exposed on the site consisted of greenish silt laid down, apparently naturally, at least 0.6 m. deep in Roman or pre-Roman times. Investigation ceased at this level due to flooding from ground-water. It is thought that the silt is either the old floodplain or an infilled channel of the nearby Ock and Thames rivers.

Above the silt lay 0.2 m. of dark earth containing abraded Romano-British pottery. This deposit graded into an overlying accumulation of dark earth, bones and medieval and redeposited Romano-British pottery some 0.5 m. in depth, and as found elsewhere in the town.<sup>1</sup> These soils and the mixture of sherds could have been created through tillage of the natural silt and the dumping of rubbish by successive cultures, as in part will be shown.

These soils were cut by a large N.-S. ditch. Less than half of the profile in section could be excavated. Small quantities of pottery dated the lower fill of the ditch to the medieval period and, with clay pipes, dated upper fills to the 16th and 17th centuries.

<sup>1</sup> R. Wilson, R. Thomas and A. Wheeler, 'Sampling a Profile of Town Soil Accumulation: Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, xlv(1979), 29.

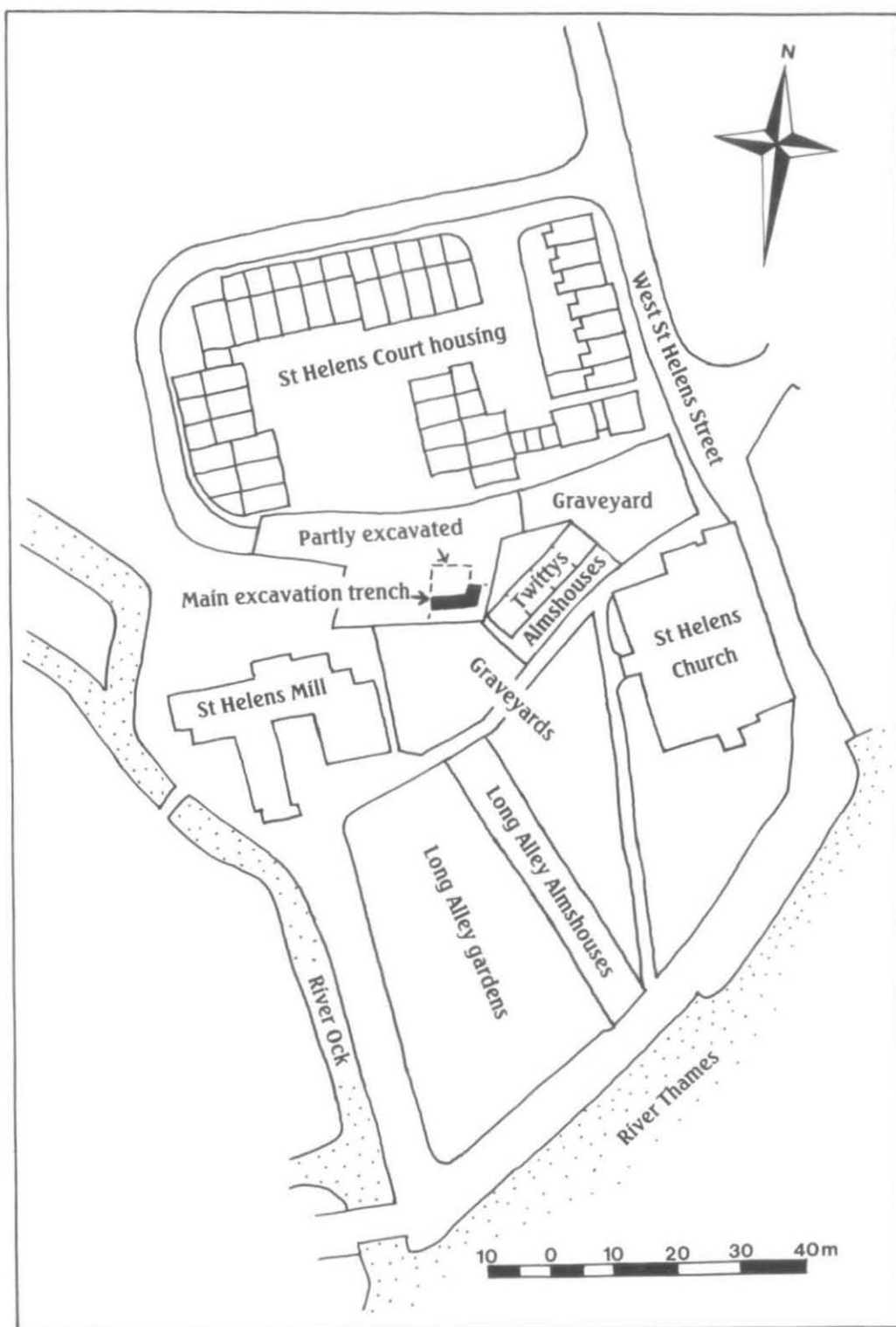


Fig. 1. Location of the excavation.

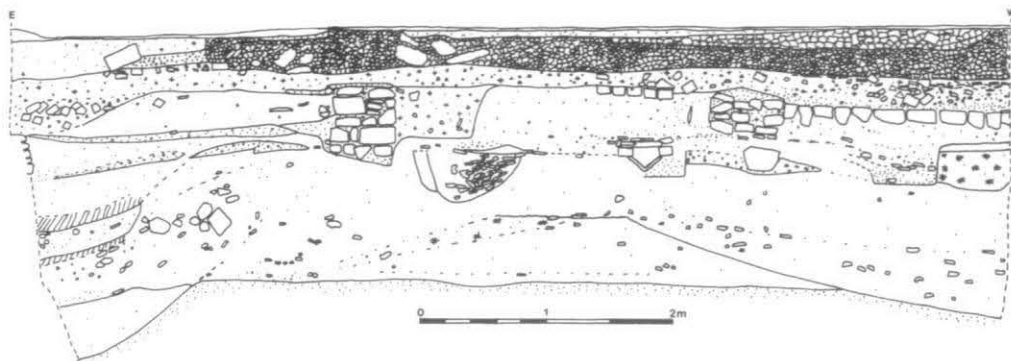


Fig. 2. E.-W. section of S. side of main trench, showing a succession of dark earth accumulations (especially R-B and medieval soil, centre bottom), medieval to early post-medieval ditch (left), shallow 16th-century pit (right), 16th- to 18th-century building feature level (above), outline of possible boundary wall-base (above ditch), early to mid 19th-century wall-bases, soil with buried tile drain and cobble level, brick and mortar demolition level, and asphalt and concrete layer (top).

Wetland snails occurred in the adjacent soil, suggesting ditch upcast and/or a reedy bank. If it continued straight on, the ditch would have run to the western side of the Long Alley Almshouses, founded in 1446, and possibly bounded the western side of the temporary late 14th-century graveyard of St. Helens church.

In the late medieval earth layer, in one 16th-century pit, and in the early post-medieval fills of the big ditch, lay domestic bone and shell waste and probable trade or industrial refuse in the form of fragmented bones of sheep feet. Probably the bones were waste from tallow and other substance extraction (see bone report, pp. 283-5 below). Human bones from the 17th-century levels of the ditch indicate that some of the infilling soil came from the nearby graveyard. In turn this suggests that the bone rubbish in the early post-medieval ditch fills may also have been redeposited from medieval contexts.

No features in the excavation trench can be directly linked to the production of the waste. It is possible that the bones travelled some distance before being dumped, perhaps from the tenements owned by the Abbey and later by St. Helens church,<sup>2</sup> nearer the street frontage, where buildings and trade activity were most likely to be located. However, this would involve supposing that the refuse passed over the large ditch to lie 7 m. or more on the other side, and it seems much more probable that the waste arrived from another direction. This is puzzling, since the only known sources nearby appear to be domestic ones at the almshouses and St. Helens Mill, whereas the composition of the bone collection does not suggest the footbones came from a domestic context (see bone report).

Presence of 'industrial' and domestic refuse confirms and usefully elaborates on documentary evidence that the area was part of the town waste as early as the 14th century.<sup>3</sup> Later this land was described as one of 'stinking ditches and filthy dunghills very unwholesome and noisome to the poor people'.<sup>4</sup> The rotting bones and other tissue debris must have contributed to this. Some of the ditches were filled in about 1580, when the Long Alley Almshouse gardens were laid out.<sup>5</sup>

From the 16th century onwards, buildings covered the site. Surviving remains are very difficult to resolve into separate building phases. The earliest features consist of an E.-W. line of late 16th-century postholes and slots extending to the then partially filled ditch. A stone surface extension of the posthole line and other holes appear to date to this level of building.

Alongside these were contemporary or later features. These included a robber-trench containing a royal farthing of Charles I (1625-44), an adjacent trench and a possible wallbase of stones. Robbing of the stonework occurred about the mid 18th century. Debris from these features indicates that the 16th- to 18th-century buildings had limestone roof-slate and plain wall plaster. Perhaps they were domestic, although

<sup>2</sup> M. Cox, *Abingdon, Abbey to Borough* (1974), 78.

<sup>3</sup> A. Preston, *Christ's Hospital, Abingdon* (1929), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

they were not strongly associated with the fine and small bones of meal-table refuse that is sometimes characteristic of kitchen and eating areas of houses.

The later period of these buildings appears contemporary with the erection in 1707 of the Twitty Almshouses, one corner of which overhangs the buried ditch. A partly robbed stone footing lay along the centre of the former ditch and probably marked the property boundary between the buildings.

If the estimated duration of buildings is correct, there was a gap in the late 18th century which appears marked by another accumulation, up to 0.5 m. of dark earth. Among other building features later dug into this soil was embedded in its surface an edge-to-edge row of upright stone slates, presumably along the border of a garden or a N.-S. earthen path; similar stone edgings are found in Albert Park, Abingdon.

Major later 18th- to mid 19th-century features consisted of two stone wall-bases aligned parallel to the former N.-S. ditch and the eastern property boundary. Within the excavation trench, the western wall-base turned 90 degrees and proceeded W. To the S. of the trench, the base of a crosswall linked the parallel wall-bases. Clean mortar among the stones of the straight eastern parallel wall-base contained a penny of 1806 — a ritual foundation token.

The wall-bases appear contemporary with a stone-walled pit left truncated by a later cellar, exposed by extending the main trench north-westward. Patches of square or rounded cobbles of pathways or yard surfaces lay beside some of these wall-bases and the pit. A drain buried 0.5 m. below the contemporary surface, consisting of inverted roof-ridge tiles topped by bricks and flat stones, also appears to belong to this period.

In 1826 the graveyard of St. Helens church was further enlarged to lie beside the Twitty Almshouses and the S. boundary of the 19th- and 20th-century property.<sup>6</sup> This and the excavation evidence indicate a truncation of the two parallel earlier 19th-century walls and a replacement of their southern cross-wall with another almost parallel major stone wall-base. Further property reorganisation is indicated by the likely eastward shift of the probable boundary at the centre of the infilled ditch, to run alongside the ditch nearer and almost touching one corner of the Twitty Almshouses.

Maps of 1842 and 1844 confirm the existence of these property boundaries and show that the wall-bases were the foundations of a narrow U-shaped building or buildings lining the E., S. and W. boundaries of the modern Vicarage site and surrounding a large open space, probably a cobbled yard.<sup>7</sup> The excavation showed that the complex consisted of discrete buildings, albeit constructed close together. Last, the map of 1842 shows in the yard a small isolated shed, apparently over the position of the stone-walled pit: probably (despite the lack of evidence for cess) a privy.

This property, its buildings and a wide passageway to the street were owned by Mr. James Vasey, a hemp sack and linen manufacturer, whose spinning shops, looms and stores of hemp and flax were destroyed by fire in 1838.<sup>8</sup> Yet the excavation detected neither burning nor evidence for this factory, and it may be that the fire did not reach this corner of the buildings; some warehouses were not burned.<sup>9</sup> The duration of this factory is unknown, though the land of the Long Alley Almshouses was once called the 'hemp pleck',<sup>10</sup> which suggests a long persistence of the trade near the trench. Vasey evidently retained the factory until 1844 or after but seems not to have prospered, and the property was acquired by John Hyde and Son, clothesdealers and frockmakers.

From the mid 18th century the Hyde family occupied one of the old Abbey tenements, a house on the frontage of West St. Helens Street adjacent to St. Helens church and the stone archway<sup>11</sup> not far from the excavation trench. By 1817 the house had been demolished, and the property became another extension of the graveyard of the church.<sup>12</sup> The Hydes moved to neighbouring property and used or built a warehouse, and presumably other buildings, adjacent to the hemp and linen flax factory.<sup>13</sup>

About 1833 John Hyde junior (born 1798) succeeded his father in charge of the firm and turned its attention to the wholesale clothing trade.<sup>14</sup> Their warehouse was undamaged by the fire of 1838.<sup>15</sup> Eventually the Hydes bought the hemp and linen flax factory, which offered enlarged premises and space to build on. Possibly it had woven linen cloth bought and used by the Hydes, but there is no evidence that clothmaking continued under them. Construction in 1852 of what became known as the Clothing Factory proper began the full-scale production of clothing. Success and wealth followed, other adjacent properties were bought, and the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 6 (map).

<sup>7</sup> St. Helens Parish map and Christ's Hospital map.

<sup>8</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, (hereafter *JOJ*), 2 March 1838.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Preston op. cit. note 3, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Anon, 'Origins of an Industry', *J.H. Viner scrapbook*, Abingdon Museum archive, i, 2, illustration.

<sup>12</sup> Preston op. cit. note 3, map.

<sup>13</sup> *JOJ* loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup> *Abingdon and Reading Herald*, 15 June 1872.

<sup>15</sup> *JOJ* loc. cit.

factory was enlarged and altered in 1862 and 1866,<sup>16</sup> but it is difficult to say how these dates relate to the archaeological features of this period.

A surviving 19th-century brick wall forms the E. and S. boundaries of the property; a bricked-up window is visible in it from the graveyard. Undoubtedly this wall formed the outside of the Clothing Factory at its greatest extent, although its stone base appears to be a remnant of the earlier phase of c.1826–44. Five m. inside, and parallel to, these brick walls was a later massive linear concrete foundation, topped with a brick wall-base 1 m. wide, which replaced the wall-base containing the penny; clearly this supported the main inside wall of the Clothing Factory. Photos, maps and architectural evidence of this area show that the inner and outer wall-bases enclosed and supported two or three stories of a red brick and grey slate building, which in turn surrounded narrow cobblestone alleys and a lower central brick building with walls parallel to those outside.<sup>17</sup> The central building was almost certainly built in the period 1852–1866. Under the outside brick walls lay the purpose-built stone walls of a large cellar which underwent several changes, including use as a stokehole (reflected in blackening of the walls and insertion of a substantial brick platform and a narrow iron-barred fireplace). These events represent an initial phase of the main period of the Clothing Factory, since late 19th- and early 20th-century photographs show that several chimneys stood elsewhere<sup>18</sup> and took over the function of the smaller excavated fireplace.

The small fireplace was replaced by two parallel brick stands and a supplying water-pipe. The rest of the cellar was filled in and criss-crossed by brick conduits, suggesting drainage to a sump nearby. Impressions of floor joists marked the surrounding deposit surfaces. All this indicates wooden floors adjacent to machinery for washing or steaming, probably at the main period of the factory operation. Occasional buttons and numerous dress-making pins were found, particularly in the surrounding building. Archaeological dating was absent, but documents hint that the main period of the Clothing Factory began at some time between 1854 and 1863 when a partnership was formed between John Hyde & Son and John Cremer Clarke from Devon.<sup>19</sup> John Hyde junior died in 1872 and was buried in a large tomb in the graveyard – land that his family had once lived on. The firm became Clarke, Sons & Co., wholesale clothiers, and lasted as late as 1931.<sup>20</sup> It had prospered in cotton goods, especially during the American Civil War; at peak the factory employed up to 2,000 men and women, including outworkers paid at piecework rates, and was perhaps the largest in England. Working conditions and management relations were claimed to be superior to those elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

A layer of brick and other rubble covered the remains of wooden flooring and machinery foundations and indicates a stage in the part demolition and multiple reuse of the factory. At first the vacant factory seems only to have been sporadically occupied, for example in 1932 by the Arlington Leather Clothing Co.<sup>22</sup> Later, the MG Car Co. Ltd. and its social club occupied some of the buildings from 1940 to around 1965.<sup>23</sup> Of the latter firm, an MG car engine number plate dating to 1938 was found in fire ash covering the rubble mentioned above. Other rubble represented the final demolition of the old factory, probably in the mid 1960s, and levelling with road debris (Fig. 2).<sup>24</sup>

## BONE AND SHELL REPORT

Some 3,000 bones and oyster, mussel and cockle shells were collected from medieval and early post-medieval deposits (see Table 1). The species present and their fragment frequencies are unexceptional apart from the bones of sheep (especially) and cattle, which are over-represented by high percentages of foot bones: 47%–63% of sheep bones are metapodials and phalanges (Table 2).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Anon, 'A Review of the Century', *J.H. Viner scrapbook*, i, 83.

<sup>17</sup> 'Origins' op. cit. note 11; Ordnance Survey map of Abingdon (1875); N. Hammond, *The book of Abingdon* (1979), 134–5.

<sup>18</sup> 'Origins', op. cit. note 11; Hammond, op. cit. note 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Post Office Directory of Berks & Oxon.*, 1854; *Directory of Oxon & Berks.*, 1863.

<sup>20</sup> *Abingdon Trade Directory*, 1828 and 1932; *Reading, Berks & Oxford Trade Directory*, 1926; *Kelly's Directory of Berks, Bucks & Oxon*, 1931.

<sup>21</sup> 'Origins' op. cit. note 11. Further social and political history is obtainable from the sources listed, as well as from the trade directories, and from files in the archives of Abingdon Museum.

<sup>22</sup> *Abingdon Trade Directory*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> For the last years of the building see: *North Berks. Herald*, 19 May 1944; *Abingdon Trade Directory*, 1964, 1965 and 1960; D. Chapman, *Oxford Mail*, 20 March 1985; and Hammond op. cit. note 17.

<sup>25</sup> Further detailed bone report on file at Environmental Archaeology Unit, University Museum, Oxford, OX1 3PW.

TABLE 1: BONE AND SHELL FRAGMENT FREQUENCY AT THE CLOTHING FACTORY, ABINGDON

Period/Century:	Medieval	Late Medieval	C16	C16	C17	C17	Total	'Corrected Count' <sup>a</sup>
Feature:	soil	soil	pit	middle ditch	upper ditch 1	upper ditch 2		
Cattle	20	33	115	32	47	13	260	260
Sheep	55	94	219	52	128	29	577	167
Pig	6	18	63	10	23	4	124	124
Horse	-	1	3	5	3	4	16	16
Dog	-	-	4	-	-	-	4	4
Cat	-	-	2	1	-	2	5	5
Rabbit	-	-	13	-	2	-	15	15
Fallow deer	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	1
Black rat	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
	82	146	419	101	203	52	1003	593
Human	-	-	-	-	12	5	17	
Domestic fowl <sup>b</sup>	-	-	9	3	4	-	16	
Domestic goose	-	-	18	-	-	-	18	
Other bird	-	1 <sup>c</sup>	1 <sup>d</sup>	6 <sup>e</sup>	-	-	8	
							59	
Oyster	34	110	238	57	37	21	497	
Mussel	4	3	12	2	-	1	22	
Cockle	1	2	14	-	-	-	17	
							536	
Unidentified bones	140	197	813	92	228	70	1540	
% Mammal identified	37	43	34	52	47	43	39	

<sup>a</sup> The corrected count is based on the exclusion of 410 foot bones of sheep.

<sup>b</sup> Bird bones were identified by Don Bramwell.

<sup>c</sup> cf. golden plover.

<sup>d</sup> cf. mallard.

<sup>e</sup> cf. mallard (2), rook/crow (2), dove (2)

These percentages of foot debris are considerably in excess of those from most regional medieval and post-medieval contexts. The elemental composition resembles slaughterhouse refuse, or possibly<sup>26</sup> a skippers'/tanners' dump, at the Old Gaol, Abingdon, where, however, the metapodial bones were buried complete and probably articulated:<sup>27</sup> here the bones were frequently broken as though the contents of their marrow and enclosing tissues were extracted for domestic or trade/industrial use, particularly by boiling. Similar and purer deposits of chopped-up post-medieval foot bones of sheep have been found at The Causeway, Bicester.<sup>28</sup>

If extraction was related to the diet of poor people, for example living in the Almshouses, the bones may be domestic waste, but this does not explain the bones at the Old Gaol, since domestic industrial extraction

<sup>26</sup> T.P. O'Connor, *Selected Groups of Bones from Skeldergate and Walmgate* (The Archaeology of York, xv.1, 1984), 22-5, 51-6.

<sup>27</sup> R. Wilson, 'The Animal Bones from the Broad Street and Old Gaol Sites, Abingdon', *Oxoniensia*, xl (1975), 120.

<sup>28</sup> R. Wilson, unpublished bone report for The Causeway site, Bicester, held by Oxford Archaeological Unit.

did not occur there though any demands of poverty ought to have resulted in the exhaustive exploitation of such resources. Poverty ought also to have resulted in the acquisition and deposition of other bony waste, in particular of relatively cheap sheep-heads, yet did not. It thus seems unlikely that the foot bones are the domestic waste of impoverished people. The low quantities of sheep cranial bones indicate that the metapodial waste is not related to rubbish which would be dumped by butchers following the distribution of the main meat carcasses from stalls or shops.

Therefore it seems most probable that the foot bones came from a slaughter-house, and via the processing of by-products from the preparation of meat carcasses. Items such as the feet, skins, horns and guts might be used in a variety of activities, as indicated by the trade or industrial sites at St. Peter's Street, Northampton and at Walmgate, York.<sup>29</sup> Tanners, tawyers, hornworkers and fellmongers might have been conveniently located close to the slaughter-house sources of their raw material. Documents may yet throw light on trades around the Clothing Factory site, and whether any of these are related to the suggested processing of sheep-fee. Extractive boiling of the foot bones would yield fat and protein which could be used to manufacture a variety of products such as candles, soap and glue.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGES OF GROUPED SKELETAL ELEMENTS

Period/ century Feature	Sheep					Cattle	Pig
	Medieval soil	Late Medieval soil	C16 pit	C16 middle ditch	C17 upper ditch 1	Medieval/ post-med. total	Medieval/ post-med. total
n	55	94	219	52	128	115	63
Percentage of n	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Head	12.7	4.3	12.8	13.5	11.7	27.0	50.8
Feet	52.7	62.8	47.5	55.8	62.5	34.8	17.5
Body	34.5	33.0	39.7	30.7	25.8	38.3	31.7

Further insight to site processes is given by the presence of five calf mandibles in the 16th-century pit. This incidence is similar to the cattle mandible pattern observed in typical 14th- to 19th-century tenement rubbish in Oxford, and also in some post-medieval deposits in Exeter.<sup>30</sup> It indicates the purchase and consumption of calf-heads by householders and confirms that pre-18th-century bones, other than metapodials, in the Clothing Factory site deposits originated as domestic waste, possibly from the Long Gallery Almshouses or St. Helens Mill.

The presence of calf mandibles, however, is not typical of the post-medieval slaughtering pattern of cattle as a whole. As in Oxford, a high proportion of the cattle bones have fused epiphyses which indicate the slaughtering of relatively mature animals. There is evidence that that heads and horn-cores of older cattle were often retained and dumped near slaughterhouses or tanneries, although longhorn horn-cores were sometimes used as construction materials of walls, wells and drains. This explains their relative absence from most medieval and later domestic or other industrial deposits,<sup>31</sup> as indeed at the Clothing Factory site.

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<sup>29</sup> M. Harman, in J.H. Williams, *St. Peters Street, Northampton: Excavations 1973-76* (1979), 328-32; O'Connor op. cit. note 26, 30-8, 51-6.

<sup>30</sup> R. Wilson, in T.G. Hassall, C.E. Halpin and M. Mellor, 'Excavations in St. Ebbes, Oxford, 1967-76; Part II', *Oxoniensia*, xlv (1984), 265-8 and microfiche; M. Maltby, *Animal Bones from Exeter, 1971-75* (1979), 38.

<sup>31</sup> R. Wilson, in Hassall et al. op. cit. note 30; microfiche reports by P. Armitage, M V1 B2, and R. Wilson, M V1 A4.

post-medieval pottery groups. Don Bramwell identified the bird bones. For help with documentary sources I am indebted to Nancy Hood (Oxford City Museum); Bill Liversidge (Abingdon Borough Archives); Mienke Cox; and Judy Thomas. Diggers enjoyed the neighbourly hospitality of Ronnie and Stephen Cox. Finally, thanks are due to John Spratley and Partners, architects, and to St. Helen's church, for permission to excavate, and to Tom Hassall, then of the O.A.U., for background liason between developers and archaeologists.

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