

DOCUMENTARY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF SOUTHAMPTON'S LEPER HOSPITAL

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ABSTRACT

A small archaeological excavation at Above Bar Street, Southampton revealed two prehistoric gullies, a substantial medieval ditch and a few other features. Large quantities of roof slates and non-local stone in the medieval ditch suggests that a significant medieval building or buildings once stood nearby, almost certainly to the south. There is documentary evidence for the presence of a leper house in this area, founded in the late 12th century and in decline by the mid-14th century, though a small part survived into the early 15th century. The filling of the ditch and dumping of demolition rubble appears to have occurred during the 14th century, coinciding with the decline of the leper house. It therefore seems likely that this ditch represents the boundary between the leper house to the south and a garden to the north, supporting the documentary evidence for the location and layout of the Leper Hospital of St Mary Magdalen.

INTRODUCTION

Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by CgMs Consulting on behalf of Atlantic Property Developments PLC to undertake a watching brief, archaeological evaluation and subsequent excavation at the former C&A building, 129–139 Above Bar Street, Southampton, centred on National Grid Reference SU 419121. The work was carried out in March 2009.

The development provided a rare opportunity to undertake archaeological work in this area of Southampton, and specifically to look for remains of the leper hospital, known from documentary evidence to have been located in this part of the city. The readily available documentary evidence relating to the leper hospital has been analysed as part of this work, in order to clarify its location, layout and context in

terms of other religious institutions within medieval Southampton.

The excavation was limited in scale, but when coupled with the documentary study makes a significant contribution to a relatively neglected aspect of the city's history. It also comes at a time that has seen several recent excavations and associated research on leper hospitals in the south of England, most notably at Chichester (Magilton *et al.* 2008), Salisbury (Powell 2006) and Winchester, where long-term investigations continue (Roffey & Marter 2010).

Site location, geology and topography

The site comprised a rectangular parcel of land just to the north of the centre of Southampton, bounded by West Marlands Road, Above Bar Street, Gibbs Road and Guildhall Square (Figure 1). It previously comprised buildings including the C&A building, 1 West Marlands Road and 1–5 Gibbs Road.

The underlying geology comprises gravel deposits of the Third River Terrace, overlain by brickearth. The site lies on a very gentle south-east facing slope at c.15.8m–16.4m above Ordnance Datum (aOD).

Archaeological background

The Southampton Historic Environment Record records a general spread of prehistoric evidence in the area, dating from the Palaeolithic into the Iron Age. Bronze Age ditches and gullies were identified during evaluations in Guildhall Square, immediately to the north, with the first definite occupation evidence datable to the Iron Age.

The site lies approximately 500m to the north of the Bargate and the medieval walled town, and immediately to the west of the major

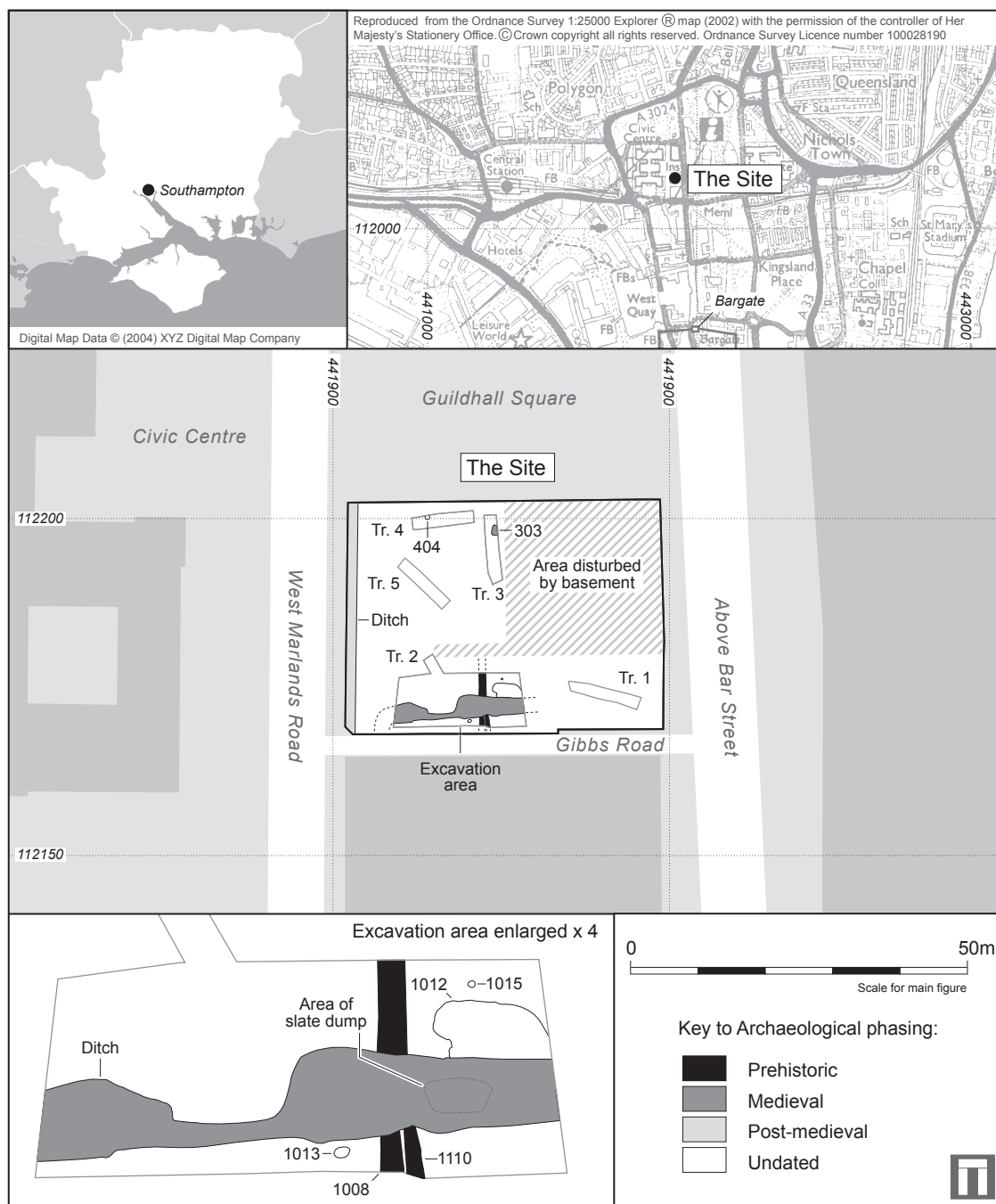


Fig 1 Site location plan and excavated features

route out of the town towards Winchester. A medieval suburb extended northwards from the Bargate along this route, though not as far as the site discussed here.

Medieval evidence is principally concerned with the Leper Hospital of St Mary Magdalen which was located in the vicinity of the site. The hospital was founded c. 1173 (see below). Documentary evidence suggests that it was in decline by the 14th century and, if it survived long enough, it presumably disappeared completely with the dissolution of St Denys' Priory in 1536.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE by A D Morton

A leper hospital was founded at Southampton in the 12th century, in or before 1173–4, when a reduction of £1 3s 2d was claimed in the town's fee farm in respect of land given to the lepers of Southampton; such a claim had not been made three years earlier (Davies 1883, 30). The leper house appears to have been in existence when Nicholas de Sigillo granted four acres to St Denys' Priory, two in front of the house of the sick (*domus infirmorum*) and two behind it, along with another two acres behind the house of the sick once his sister-in-law had died (Blake 37b & 274, both dated by him to around 1150/77).

Briefly put, the Southampton burgesses, the canons of St Denys' Priory and the king all claimed an interest in the early leper house, often to the exclusion of other parties, and it is difficult in places to decide who had the stronger claim. As well as granting land to the lepers, the burgesses anciently supported them by the impost of a penny on every tun of foreign wine landed at Southampton, and under the laws of the Guild Merchant, written down around 1300, the lepers were remembered in the charity of the town (Davies 1883, 30, 449; Studer 1910–11, i, 26–7). In 1291, during a lengthy dispute with Edward I about the advowson, it was affirmed that the town had the hospital at farm and appointed the warden (Blake 1981, xli–xlii). Although the claim was very poorly documented, and the burgesses eventually lost, it is still possible that they lost mainly because their opponent was the king, as Platt (1973, 58) speculates.

Although St Denys would successfully

advance a claim to the leper house in the course of the 14th century, it is notable that the priory was never assigned a part in the dispute of 1290–3, and it may have exercised control at first only over the chapel; something that Blake (1981) points out. The priory's claim in the 14th century was founded on the stated existence of a document issued in 1179 that was said to have been destroyed in the French raid of 1338, and in which Pope Alexander III confirmed by bull the priory's possession of "the said hospital by the name of St Mary Magdalen's Chapel" (*CPR 1399–1401*, 505). If such a document had existed, in the form claimed, it would suggest that the arrangement was in existence from the very beginning, or nearly so. Blake is probably correct in suggesting that this involved only the chapel itself; it may not be entirely a coincidence that 1179 was also the year when the third Lateran Council demanded that *leprosaria* be provided with chapels and cemeteries. Nevertheless, the words are ambiguous and there is a hint that the priory's involvement might have been more extensive in the 12th century. Previous to Nicholas de Sigillo's ownership of six acres either side of the house of the sick, there had also been a messuage "where Snelgar used to live", which his daughter, Ediza or Edied, had granted to the canons of St Denys (Blake 37b & 274). This could indicate a link, very early in the leper house's existence, between the priory and its first building; and it is not wholly impossible that the leper house had been based on Snelgar's messuage.

Royal involvement in the affairs of the leper house increased after the destructive French raid of 1338 prompted the need to relieve Southampton's religious houses (Platt 1973, 112). In 1347, Edward III granted the leper house to the priory, a grant confirmed in 1390 by Richard II, along with the right to the leper house's gifts and grants (*CPR 1345–48*, 298–9; *CPR 1396–99*, 443–4). It was soon alleged that St Denys was not performing its duty to maintain the chantry and to say masses, and as a result of an inquisition held before John Tauk in 1395, the leper house was placed in the custody of the king's clerk. Late in 1398 St Denys regained custody, and in 1401 it obtained the possessions of the leper house, without any charitable

obligation, and kept the income for itself (*PRO C260/208/17*; *CPR 1399–1401*, 505; Blake 15).

It seems that the leper house entered a sharp decline during this period. One of the accusations put to John Tauk was that St Denys had allowed the houses to fall into decay, and had carried away the timber and the stones of the walls to the priory, and in 1401 it was stated that the hospital comprised one small house (*CPR 1396–99*, 443–4; *CPR 1399–1401*, 505). Possibly the last reference to the “mesell [lepers, translating *meseaus*] of the mawdlens” is to be found in William Overey’s translation of the ordinances of Southampton’s Guild Merchant (which had been written in French), dated by him to 1473. As the translation is almost complete, omitting seven of the 77 ordinances, it is possible that the reference to the lepers is included for antiquarian purposes, simply because it was in the original, but it may be the case that the leper house still existed at this date, giving meaning to the translation (Studer 1910–11, i, 47). Later recensions and updatings of the ordinances, dating from 1498 onwards, do not include any reference to the lepers (*ibid*, 116–60).

Status

The earliest documents indicate that the hospital might be variously identified in the beginning as a leper house or as a house of the sick, but this ambivalence is not reflected in later texts. For example, seventeen texts that refer to a feature of the hospital in the 13th century (the last dating to 1286) all refer to the lepers (Blake 16, 18, 20, 33, 35, 38–9, 45, 48–53, 56, 92, 249 & 274). Nothing indicates an alteration in the function of the hospital away from a leper house.

Location

The buildings and other features of the leper hospital stood in the parish of All Saints, beyond the northern suburb, and on both sides of the king’s highway leading to Winchester (what is now Above Bar Street), both sides lying close to the highway. The land where they stood is usually specified in the texts as West or East Garston, later known as West and East Magdalens fields (Figure 2 marks a boundary based on what was

mapped in 1846). A location close to the street can be inferred from the distribution of acres that are specifically stated to border the leper house, as well as those outlying acres where no reference is made to the leper house. In East Garston, in eight documents dealing with land in the easternmost part, all datable to the mid or late 13th century, no reference is made to the leper house as a landmark (Blake 17, 21–4, 33, 195 & 208). As for West Garston, six acres are specifically stated to lie behind the leper house and the garden of the lepers (Blake 49), and in one case it is evident that the buildings in West Garston were close enough to the highway to be used as a marker for land in East Garston, which lay *ex opposito dicte domus [Beate Marie Magdalene]* (Blake 48).

In the case of the western half, it can also be inferred that the various features of the leper house extended for a considerable distance north–south in the middle of the 13th century (Blake 48, dated by him to 1250/2). Six acres are referred to, which altogether account for at least twelve acres behind the hospital and the garden of the lepers:

one acre to the north of a ditch
[one acre once held by Michael de Aumbelia]
one acre to the north of that
[one acre of the lepers]
three separate acres to the north of that
[two acres once held by Robert de la More]
[two acres now held by the lepers]
one acre to the north of those.

Combined, these twelve or more acres formed a large bloc, which may be understood in the context of the later estimate of 19ac 3r 13p for the entirety of West Magdalens fields (Blake 1981, lxxviii), and making deduction also for another four acres accounted for on the western or northern parts of West Garston: one acre to the north of the garden (Blake 16, 45 & 51); two separate acres in the north, next to Gosanwell Lane (now Cumberland Place; Blake 55, 59, 83, 107 & 195); and the headacre to the west (Blake 49 & 249). If all of this large bloc backed onto the hospital and the garden, the implication is that much more than half of

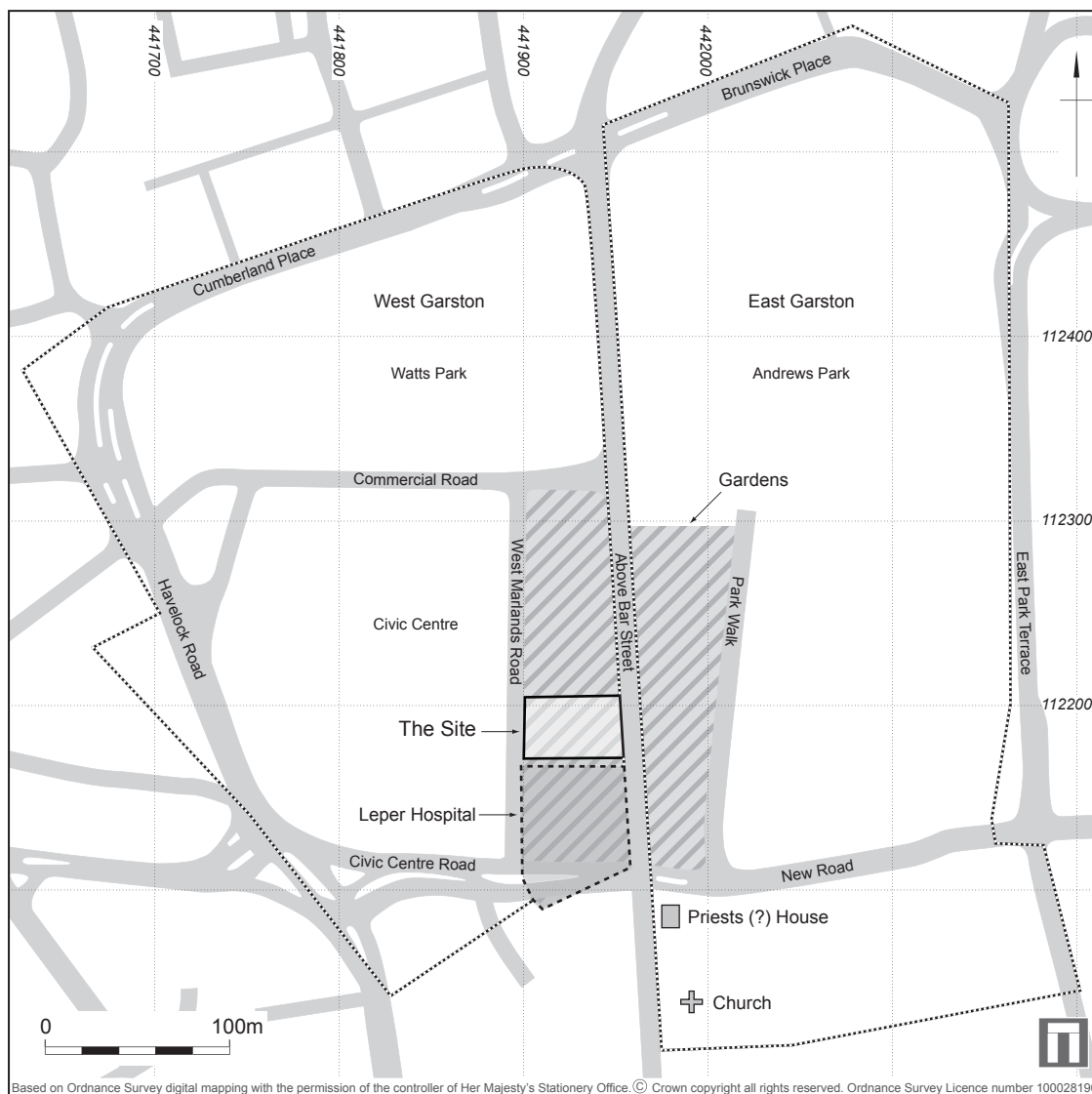


Fig 2 Location and extent of leper hospital and related features, based on documentary evidence

the north–south extent of West Garston was devoted to the leper house.

The large enclave in the south-east corner of West Magdalens fields is a notable feature, which would seem, however roughly, to fit the necessary location and length of the medieval hospital (*cf.* Blake 1981, cii, n9). The southern half (its northern boundary is marked on Figure 2 by a broken line) was occupied by Thorner's Charity almshouses from 1787 onwards (Davies

1883, 307–9) and the northern half was redeveloped for housing in the 19th century. If the western enclave is worth consideration, on the grounds of shape and size, it should be noted that a similar enclave existed on the eastern side of Above Bar Street. However, since an acre of land in East Garston, immediately to the north of the garden of the lepers, is said to lie opposite the leper house in West Garston, it may be surmised that the eastern buildings

did not extend as far to the north as those on the west.

Structures

Figure 2 marks the approximate location of the principal features referred to as landmarks based on the Royal Engineers' survey plan of 1846 and the enclaves that existed within both fields. The general location of medieval features is also shown.

Within East Garston, the southernmost building was the Church of St Mary Magdalen. It is mentioned in passing in five 13th century documents that deal with a piece of land on the east side of the road, above the Church of St Mary Magdalen (Blake 18, 20, 35 & 52–3, the latest being dated 20 March 1286). Three of the five specifically stating that the land is *supra ecclesiam Magdalene*, the other two using more ambivalent phrasing. However, all five state that the piece of land being described lies between land once held by Simon Gore from God's House and land once held by Alfeba (or Alvefa), widow of Ralph Katel, from the Magdalen; and (despite the editor's uncertainty on this matter) it therefore appears that the one piece of land above the church is being described. Two documents (Blake 35 & 52) contain an unusual construction, stating that the piece of land is outside the North Gate (= the Bargate), which implies that the church lay on or close to the southern fringe of East Garston.

Although it may have been the case that there was a cemetery attached to the Church of St Mary Magdalen, as required by the third Lateran Council, it has to be stated that no document ever mentions a cemetery here. There are sufficient examples indicating that cemeteries were not inevitably a feature at *leprosaria* (Rawcliffe 2006, 261–2), and the absence of evidence in Southampton may for once be evidence of absence.

One of the chaplains, Simon Gore, is linked with several pieces of land in around the Magdalen. Beside the land once held from God's House, already mentioned, he was granted a barn with curtilage and land behind it, which lay to the south of the Magdalen; a messuage in a similar position; an acre to the north of East Garston; and an acre in the east

of East Garston; and he is probably also the Simon *clericus* who was granted the moiety of a messuage (Blake 50, 54, 58, 24 & 34). With the possible exception of this last grant, which survives only as a fragment, all of the places lay to the east of the highway, several very close to the church.

A little to the north of the church there stood a house (perhaps *the* house) of St Mary Magdalen (Blake 33; datable to before 1279 and circa 1235–50). Although the leper house itself is called a house in several documents, that phrase is otherwise used only to describe features in West Garston and it may be the case that the chaplain's residence is referred to here.

The northernmost feature of the leper house in East Garston was a garden, referred to in two mid-13th-century documents that deal with an acre of land to the north of the garden that lay next to the garden (*iungit gardino leprosorum*; Blake 48, Blake 92). Gardens are rarely mentioned as landmarks, and it might be thought that this particular garden was somehow noteworthy, perhaps by reason of its large size, or because it was a walled garden.

In West Garston, the southernmost feature was a stone wall. Two pieces of land (one half an acre, the other an acre and a half) lay just to the south of it, as recorded in roughly contemporary documents (Blake 31 & 56, the first dated to 25 March 1269). No other documents refer to a wall, and its full extent cannot be gauged.

The leper house, presumably behind the wall, is referred to as a landmark in seven 12th and 13th-century documents, from 1150/77 to 1252/58. In roughly chronological order, they are:

Blake 37b & 274: two acres behind the house of the sick and two acres in front of it; and another two acres behind it.

Blake 38 & 39: land lying between the house of the lepers of Hampton and Kepecruche.

Blake 249: a field behind the hospital of the lepers of Southampton.

Blake 48: an acre of land opposite the house of the Blessed Mary Magdalen.

Blake 49: six acres behind the houses and garden of the lepers of St Mary Magdalen; stretching to the west from the aforesaid houses and garden of the lepers.

Attention has to be drawn to the wording of the latest of these documents, where “house” twice becomes “houses». At the very least, this has to indicate that several buildings existed on the west side in 1252/58, even though it remains unclear whether there always were several buildings or whether they grew in number from a single, 12th-century establishment. These references to “houses» presumably confirm that the domicile of the lepers was located here.

North of the leper house lay another garden, referred to in three 13th-century documents relating to the same one acre of land that lay to the north of the garden (Blake 16, 45 & 51). It is also mentioned twice in Blake 49. These references indicate that the garden was in the northern part of the hospital complex, with the hospital to the south of it. As with the garden on the east side, it seems likely that this was a large or walled garden.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

A watching brief during the demolition of buildings and preparation of the site for construction was followed by an archaeological evaluation comprising five 10 × 1.8m machine-dug trenches which avoided known basements. Archaeological features were encountered in three of the five evaluation trenches (see Figure 1), and comprised a large, irregular (in plan) medieval ditch in trench 2 in the south, a small, shallow sub-rectangular medieval or early post-medieval pit in trench 3, and an undated pit or scoop in trench 4 in the north-west.

A c. 20 by 10m excavation area, centred on the medieval ditch in trench 2, clarified its orientation and form, and also identified two prehistoric gullies and a small number of other features (see Figure 1). The subsequent watching brief carried out during ground reduction works revealed more of the medieval ditch and recorded a post-medieval ditch along the western side of the site.

Prehistoric

Two parallel gullies (1008 and 1010), aligned approximately north-south, were recorded in the east of the excavation area. Both were

between 0.7m and 0.8m wide and 0.5m deep with moderately steep, concave sides and concave bases. Although one probably cut the other, the similarity between the fills prevented any attempt to distinguish the sequence of gullies. A small assemblage of worked and burnt flint was recovered, along with a tiny, abraded sherd of flint-tempered pottery, only broadly datable to the later prehistoric period.

Gullies (1008) and (1010) may have been field or enclosure boundaries, perhaps part of the same system of shallow, Bronze Age linear features recorded in the Guildhall Square evaluation immediately to the north (Cottrell 2005).

Medieval

The most significant medieval feature comprised a substantial ditch, aligned approximately east-west, in the south of the excavation area. During the watching brief the ditch was observed to turn to the south, immediately to the west of the excavation area.

At its widest, the ditch was generally between 2.5m and 3m wide and 0.4–0.6m deep with irregular sides and base, narrowing to a minimum 1m wide and only 0.2m deep in one section. There was no discernable difference in the fills between the wider and narrower parts.

Pottery (65 sherds weighing 570g) from the ditch includes a few residual sherds of Romano-British coarseware and 18 sherds of Anglo-Norman wares (late 11th century – c. 1250), including two finger-impressed jar rims. Other wares date to c. 1250 – c. 1350. Most are local wares, with a few sherds of Laverstock-type coarseware and one imported ware (Saintonge whiteware). Four fragments of medieval ceramic building material comprise roof tile, including a fragment of glazed, crested ridge tile.

In addition to a substantial dump of roof slate fragments in the top of the ditch in the eastern side of the excavation area, relatively large quantities of building stone and roof slate fragments, which all appeared to have entered the ditch from the south, were recovered from all of the fills.

The roof slate fragments, some retaining nail holes, conform to the general shape of medieval slates, with a rectangular lower section and a curved or irregular upper outline, and

a single nail hole (e.g. Platt & Coleman-Smith 1975, fig. 271). The rest of the stone consists of unworked pieces of limestone, probably from relatively local sources, most likely the Purbeck Beds of south Dorset. The demolition rubble suggests that a building had been present in the vicinity, probably immediately to the south.

The single metal object recovered from the upper fill of the ditch is a residual copper alloy pin of Mid-Saxon type, its significance (if any) in this location unknown. It is a complete example with a wrythen-decorated biconical head, grooved ring collar and straight shaft of Hinton's type Cb2i (Hinton 1996).

Other features of possible medieval or uncertain date included a large, irregular cut (1012), perhaps a tree throw hole, pits (303) and (404) recorded in the evaluation, and two possible post-holes (1013 and 1015).

Post-medieval and Modern

The watching brief identified a substantial ditch aligned along the western side of the site. This ditch was over 2m wide, 1m deep and was dated to the post-medieval period on the basis of a small number of clay pipe fragments present in its single fill. The footings of a brick wall, probably 19th century in date, cut this ditch.

DISCUSSION

The medieval ditch along the south side of the site seems, from the pottery, to have been backfilled in the 14th century. Furthermore, the presence of a large quantity of building rubble, which appears to have been deliberately dumped into the ditch, suggests the presence of a substantial medieval building or buildings in the immediate vicinity, one with a slate roof and glazed finials.

The enclosure-like form of the ditch may reflect its use as a boundary surrounding the postulated buildings to the south. A relatively narrow and shallow section of the ditch in this area could have been some form of entrance; however, it is equally possible, given its very irregular form, that this is the product of either the way the ditch was originally dug or its subsequent maintenance and re-cutting. The ditch

probably represents the boundary between the leper house to the south and a garden to the north, broadly confirming the documentary evidence for the location and layout of the Leper Hospital of St Mary Magdalen.

In the absence of *in situ* building remains, the chronology of the structural sequence remains uncertain. However, pottery indicates medieval activity probably beginning around the middle of the 12th century, and the building(s) at least partially demolished in the 14th century, which coincides with documentary evidence for the decline of the leper hospital.

In many respects, Southampton's leper house appears typical. A foundation in the 12th century, the dedication to St Mary Magdalen, a location not far outside the town and close to a main highway, all find many so parallels that they do not have to be listed here (Rawcliffe 2006, *passim*). Despite the relative paucity of evidence, it seems likely that the cultivation of extensive gardens was normal, not only for the maintenance of the lepers but also as part of their treatment (*cf.* Rawcliffe 2006, 327–8). More unusually (perhaps because more rarely recorded), the nearby pieces of land that the chaplain, Simon Gore, was granted might also suggest that he was providing for himself. The existence of "houses" rather than a single house may itself indicate that the hospital provided separate dormitories, at least by the middle of the 13th century. At all events, to judge from the little that we are told about the leper house, we may suppose that it developed organically, like that at Brompton Bridge, North Yorkshire (Cardwell 1995, 234–8), not on a claustral layout (*cf.* Gilchrist 1992, 104). Possibly the strangest part of this development was the fact that it lay on both sides of the main highway; a more common arrangement would have been to put all the buildings on the same side. Lastly and unhappily, the slow fizzling-out of the leper hospital into the 15th century, along with uncertainty about its precise fate, finds parallels throughout the country (Rawcliffe 2006, 314).

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