

## **The Archaeology of Merseyside, 1500 to 1750 - Summary**

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Using the generally accepted term 'post-medieval', as a phrase to describe the period from AD 1500–1750, seems a rather contrite way of describing what was clearly a time of innovation and social and economic transition in our part of southwest Lancashire, Merseyside. The Merseyside Archaeological Society 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in 2001 looked at how our knowledge and understanding from the prehistoric to the medieval periods had clearly advanced from the first assessment of these periods in 1986 (Merseyside Archaeological Society 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference, *Journal of Merseyside Archaeological Society* Volume 7). It is therefore appropriate that this conference has moved the discussion forward in time, addressing transition not only in period subject matter but also the changing environment in which we practice archaeology and how this has influenced our access to and understanding of the subject.

So what are the changes that have continued to influence archaeological activity since the 1986 conference? I want to mention two key issues: the changing attitude as to what constitutes 'archaeology' and the circumstances in which the vast majority of investigations arise. For the former, the rise in recognition of the more recent past as 'historical archaeology' and 'industrial archaeology' (both using tangible remains and documentary sources) has had implications for the way we investigate, protect sites and also engage the public. Simply, we can see more standing remains, have surviving documentation for their research and, in some instances, the direct recollections of people who lived around and worked in the environment. For the latter, it is the domination of development funded archaeological work, which local government planning policy requires to take place to identify and preserve archaeological remains when threatened by development. By inference this not only dictates where we investigate but also the nature and degree of source information for any subsequent research.

Speakers rose to the challenge of adding substance to and animating the post-medieval period within the current research climate by providing well-structured papers that outlined and assessed the current state of subject knowledge, identified gaps in understanding and considered priorities for further research.

Alan Crosby's overview dispelled some historians' assumptions that North West England was a backwater in terms of its urbanisation, developing transport and industrial activities. The transition in both the social and economic scene can be demonstrated as underway well before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the role of the Merseyside area in this development has clearly been overlooked or downplayed.

Alan importantly reminded us of the joint research power that co-operation of archaeologists and historians

can bring to our understanding of this period. The process of change in the rural landscape raised questions about the relationship between settlement, farmsteads and field enclosure. As Ron Cowell explained the latter was a system underway in the medieval period and continued into the post medieval. Ron advocated research into the vernacular architecture of the region and its relationship with changing landscape use to give an insight into the changing social and economic dynamics. Rob Philpott discussed the expansion in our understanding of settlement through discreet excavations in some towns, for example, Prescot and farmstead sites such as Big Lea Green, St Helens. He pointed out that forthcoming large scale investigations associated with the development of Liverpool's waterfront would probably greatly expand our knowledge of individual trades, technology and urban growth of the port but the general fragmentary nature of developer funded investigation needed to be supplemented and guided by a coherent strategy for investigating a range of settlement activity. Completing this overview, Christine Longworth admirably compressed the diverse and extensive 'A-Z' equivalent of the growth of industries from brewing to windmills explaining the nature of both the agrarian and more urban activities and existing trading links. Using data obtained from the county Historic Environment Records (HERs) she explained that much of the evidence had come from documentary references revealing the quantifiable lack of field investigation into early industry.

Introducing the afternoon session on specific industries, David Higgins emphasised the importance of clay pipe manufacture in the region, citing examples of dominant manufacturing centres at Chester and Rainford. The key research question was the location and investigation of Liverpool kiln sites for which 18<sup>th</sup>-century documentation suggests a significantly sized industry. Likewise Ruth Hurst-Vose reminded us of the value of documentary research allied to archaeological excavation in investigating the glass industry. Using examples from Lancashire, Cheshire and Merseyside, Ruth demonstrated the importance of intra and inter-county comparison in order to increase understanding of early industrial sites. Whilst the ceramic industry has benefited from concentrated investigation and research, Christine Longworth and Jeff Speakman advocated the need for synthesis of existing collections and concentrated research into production sites. The ceramics industry was an example used by Peter Davey to promote the importance of producing research models to analyse patterns of trade in the post medieval period; a research method which Peter identified as rarely used by those studying the post-medieval period.

A constant theme of the papers has been the call for better integration and synthesis of our knowledge. This clearly needs to be reconciled with the immediate priority of archaeological projects to gather as much data as possible prior to its loss. Speakers advocated that that resource could be maximised through investigation

of those sites thought likely to answer specific research questions. However, our lack of knowledge does not necessarily constitute a lack of research into the subjects but possibly lack of awareness of what others, primarily universities, are producing. Fortunately the northwest archaeological community is embarking on the production of an archaeological research framework, which it is envisaged, will answer the aforementioned calls for synthesis, highlight research gaps and give confidence and justification when requiring development funded investigations or requesting project research grants.

The county Historic Environment Records (formerly known as SMRs) are the current knowledge base used to make the key decisions on the investigation and protection of archaeological remains. In relation to the Merseyside HER, there are fundamental issues that have a bearing on how we can investigate the post-medieval and later periods in the region. The compilation of the Merseyside HER concentrated on gathering data on the periods up to 1750 in the rural fringes of urban areas that were then thought to be most under threat of development. As a consequence, very little data exists for the urban areas and those remaining industrial landscape areas now most under threat of change and loss. Analysing the data by period shows that of the 10,000 records in the HER, approximately 3,000 include a post-medieval date period (1500-1750) or are exclusive to this period. An added complication is the inaccurate ascribing of the post-medieval period to sites whose origins are in the industrial period (1750-1901). Of the 2,000 HER records for which the date period is unknown, the majority relate to houses, farms, cottages and unspecified buildings, wells and bridges, all types of site that could clearly relate to the post-medieval or industrial periods. Many of the aforementioned problems could be resolved through investment in documentation. HERs are key research tools, many using the digital software, which not only documents information but also can be used to synthesise, support and devise analytical models.

Speakers recognised the benefits of researching sites that may show continuity of activity, whether this be through the same type of use or a changing variety of uses. A key problem for investigating the urban post-medieval is that the scale of 19<sup>th</sup>-century development, in Liverpool for instance, all but obliterated any upstanding post-medieval remains. Subsequent 20<sup>th</sup>-century development and expansion had the same effect subsuming once rural areas. However, our ability to research these areas is being enhanced by historic landscape characterisation projects sponsored by English Heritage. The Merseyside project has just begun and one key aim is to highlight survival of historic elements within the current urban and rural landscape for enhancement, protection and further research.

This was the first 'Archaeology on Merseyside' Conference to address the post-medieval period. It will be interesting to review our knowledge in a few years time, when we must be able to demonstrate progress in

a number of the research priorities raised by speakers. Another challenge is to produce a conference on the archaeology of the industrial period in Merseyside since evidence from this period is increasingly under threat.

In 2003 Liverpool won European Capital of Culture status for 2008 and the profile of heritage within Merseyside is sure to be raised in the public eye if Liverpool's submission to UNESCO World Heritage Site status is successful. We must all look forward to capitalising on this.