

## Medieval Settlement in Merseyside

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### Introduction

The 1986 Merseyside Archaeological Society seminar which was published in 1991 saw an emphasis on two aspects of medieval settlement and one artefact study: the first was Jen Lewis's examination of earthwork sites in West Derby Hundred, a study of tenure and estates, which arose out of her PhD thesis and has recently been published (Lewis 2000); the second was the medieval towns, essentially the chartered boroughs and markets, which developed out of a commission from Merseyside County Council (Philpott 1988). A third contribution, by Peter Davey, covered the field of post-Roman ceramics, including pottery of the medieval period (Davey 1991). The present article attempts an overview of the contribution that archaeology has made to an understanding of medieval settlement within Merseyside over the last 15 years since the seminar papers were published. It is not intended to consider standing buildings here, other than to mention the implications of one piece of building recording work, at Aigburth, nor is there more than a brief reference to the artefacts, except to draw attention to current work on one important finds assemblage at Meols which has far-reaching implications for an understanding of the national pattern of artefact use and distribution for the medieval period. Unless otherwise stated, the excavations were conducted by the Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Section (now the National Museums Liverpool Field Archaeology Unit).

In one major respect the subject of medieval settlement has been well served in Merseyside. The landscape context of medieval, and later settlement, has been studied in some detail. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a valuable series of reports was compiled for the five districts of Merseyside as a commission by the then Merseyside County Council. The report on Wirral was published by the Merseyside Archaeological Society in 1978 (Chitty 1978), but the others have only recently been updated by their authors and published by the society (Cowell 2002; Chitty 2002; Lewis 2002). Despite some variety in approach and emphasis, these set the scene for the medieval and later landscape and settlement in the county, using documentary and map evidence, and the sparse archaeological data that existed, to reconstruct the medieval settlement pattern and land-use within the framework of the medieval townships.

Since the 1986 seminar progress in understanding the medieval period in Merseyside through archaeological investigation has been patchy. Unlike the prehistoric and Romano-British periods (Philpott, this volume), there has been no systematic research programme to investigate medieval settlement, landscape or material culture within the county with the notable exception of Jen Lewis's work. Most of the archaeological work

before 1990 was undertaken in response to development threats on known sites. Some relatively small-scale excavations were undertaken to rescue information from sites using the very limited resources of the Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Section although without necessarily having the funds to complete the analysis. The disparate nature of the sites examined and the generally inadequate resources to undertake large-scale stripping of sites means that sites have not always yielded their full potential. In addition, much of the work has been opportunistic, in response to specific threats, rather than through the pursuit of a long-term strategic research programme. In 1990 the principle of developer funding became enshrined in government policy through *Planning Policy Guidance 16* (PPG16). This has led to a situation within the county where a few large-scale excavations have been undertaken which were fully funded by the developer. But inadequate provision for post-excavation analysis and reporting exposed the weakness of the process by the failure of the units responsible to bring the results to publication.

A further limitation is the uneven geographical coverage of the work. Although the modern metropolitan borough districts were created in 1974 and with the exception of Wirral reflect no historical boundaries, it is convenient to discuss the archaeology by reference to these. Most of the work has been undertaken on later medieval or post-medieval sites in the districts of Knowsley and St Helens. The medieval town of Prescot has seen considerable archaeological attention since the mid 1970s. A study of the structure of the town, which combined data from a detailed 1592 survey by King's College, Cambridge, with later surveys, taking into account also the evidence of the Court Leet for the 16th century, enabled the plan and layout of the town of the early post-medieval period to be reconstructed in some detail (Bailey 1937; Davey 1978). Excavations and watching briefs from 1980 have revealed significant if patchy information on the medieval town. St Helens District has seen some archaeological investigations, from sites within the medieval borough of Newton-le-Willows (Philpott forthcoming), to the rural manorial or yeoman sites at Micklehead Green, Eccleston Hall and latterly in 2002 Big Lea Green Farm, Sutton (Towle and Speakman forthcoming). Although Wirral has produced some early pre-conquest evidence, a considerable breakthrough in locating sites for this difficult period, there has been little work on later medieval sites. One exception has been a site at Mill Hill Road, Irby which is perhaps better known for its prehistoric and Romano-British occupation site but which on post-excavation analysis proved to have a medieval phase sealing Romano-British and probable Norse occupation (see Philpott this volume). Sefton district has seen only the recording of the stone millrace of an early post-medieval watermill in Sefton township, with the further excavation of the mill site by Gifford and Partners in the winter of 2004-5. As the most built-up of the districts, inevitably opportunities within Liverpool

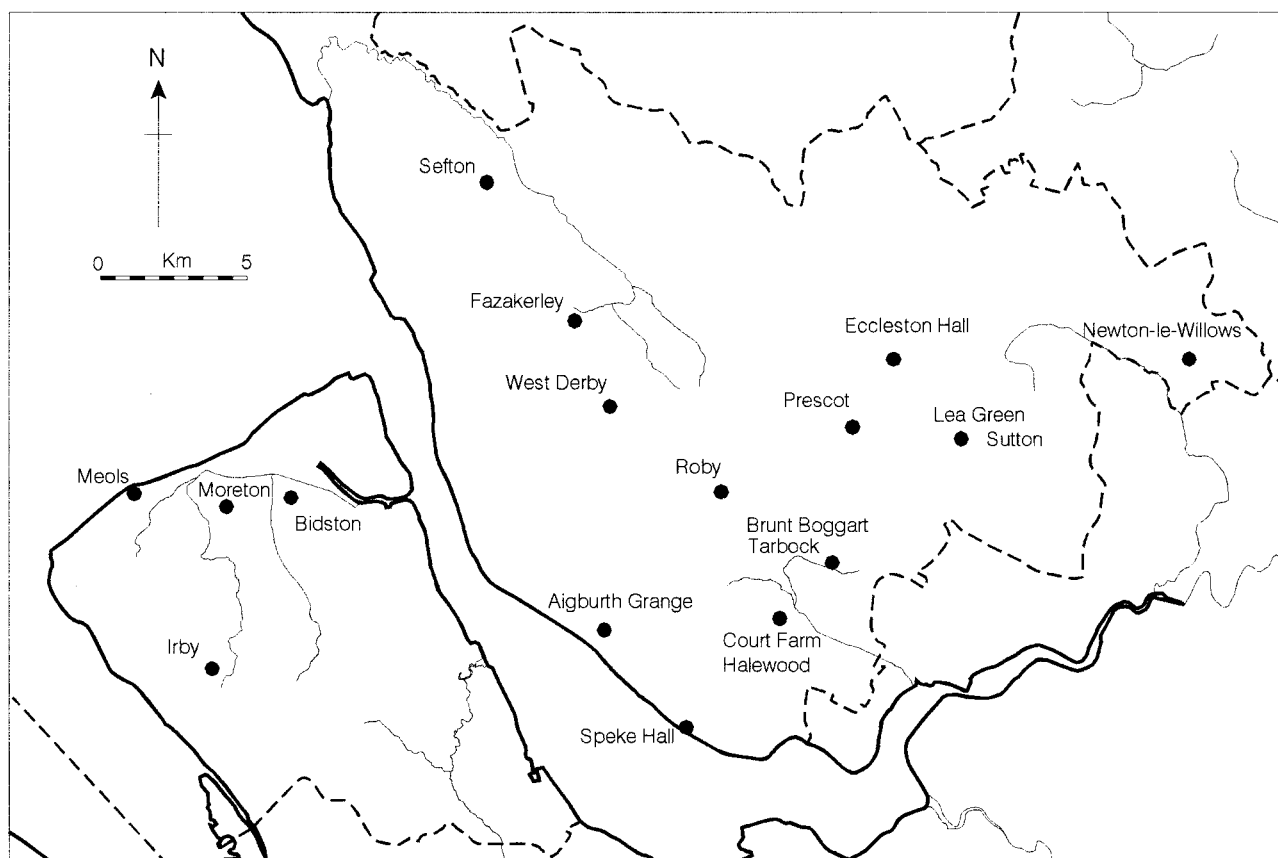


Fig. 1. Location map of sites referred to in the text

have been limited although one major advance was the examination of a hamlet of Walton at Fazakerley by the Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Unit, and to subsequent extensive excavation by the then Lancaster University Archaeological Unit, prior to the construction of Fazakerley Prison. Another small area of an important site was investigated close to West Derby Castle.

#### **Medieval Origins and Long-Term Settlement Patterns**

The search for the settlement pattern of the later medieval period inevitably begins in the pre-Norman period. The origins of some modern settlements can be seen from documents or place-names, to lie in the pre-conquest period but the physical remains of this period, other than early church sites, have proved most elusive. It was therefore a matter of some significance when evidence of pre-conquest settlement was discovered certainly at two sites in Merseyside, and probably also at a third (fig 1).

The first, at Court Farm, Halewood, turned up in the excavation of a small nucleated Romano-British rural settlement or 'hamlet' (Adams and Philpott forthcoming). The site continued to receive pottery well into the 4th century. A phase of pits and post-holes with a very small amount of abraded Roman pottery was postulated as post-Roman though radiocarbon dates have not yet been submitted to prove this. However, one of a separate series of pits containing discarded stakes, probably from

a palisade, produced a 9th century radiocarbon date. The Anglo-Saxon pits had cut through an extensive Roman settlement although no certain Saxon building remains were found. A thin halo of medieval pottery around Court Farm itself, which lay close to the excavated site, suggests a shift by the 13th or 14th century to the later farm site.

The second site, at Hoylake Road, Moreton, Wirral, was excavated within the oval enclosure for a medieval chapel of ease which was demolished about 1690. No trace of the chapel was found but a sequence of three buildings was discovered, apparently enclosed by a sequence of ditches, showing at least two re-cuts. In the top fill of one ditch was a unique silver penny of Eadwig (AD 955-9) from a south-western mint (Cook and Besly 1990, 229, Pl. 22, no 81). Finds were very sparse, consisting of a mudstone hone of a type found at pre-Conquest sites, a possible residual sherd of Roman pottery and a 4th-century Roman coin. A large deposit of burnt organic material included weed seeds as well as cereal grains from oats, barley and wheat, possibly free-threshing bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), an identification which is consistent with the absence of any wheat glumes or spikelets (P. Tomlinson pers. comm.). A late Saxon date seems likely although radiocarbon dates remain a priority from this deposit to refine the dating evidence.

The final site is the late prehistoric and Romano-

British site at Mill Hill Road, Irby, Wirral. Here the rock-cut foundation trench of a building produced a Saxo-Norman spike lamp of 10th-12th century date along with residual Roman pottery in the fill (Philpott and Adams forthcoming). Examination of the stratigraphy suggests that a phase of three or four buildings may belong to the early medieval period, while the plan of the buildings, or at least the sections that survive, which appear to have a distinctive bow-sided shape, have a form which is characteristic of Anglo-Scandinavian houses (Richards 2000). The absence of datable artefacts in what is virtually an aceramic period together with environmental samples which lacked sufficiently secure material to produce reliable dates means that direct dating evidence is lacking. However, the presence of an amber bead, though not in itself diagnostic of date, is consistent with a Norse date. This tantalising evidence needs to be taken together with the evidence of the place-name for the township, which combines Norse elements '*Íri*' (Irishmen) and the suffix '*-býr*', meaning 'farm of the Irish', providing an explicit reference to Viking settlement somewhere in the vicinity. The argument for the dating is based on evidence of the building form, the presence of a Saxo-Norman lamp on the site, and the stratigraphic sequence, combined with circumstantial evidence of Norse settlement in the township. If the interpretation is correct, this is the first time that Anglo-Scandinavian rural settlement has been found in lowland north west England.

Not only do these sites represent rare archaeological evidence for pre-conquest settlement in north west England, but also the manner of their discovery is instructive. In each case they were recovered in excavations targeted at remains of a different period. At Halewood and Irby the known site was Romano-British in date, while at Moreton the excavation attempted to recover evidence of a later medieval chapel, albeit on a site which also produced traces of Roman activity.

Increasing confidence that the settlement patterns in the region involved long-term continuity of site location is suggested by another phenomenon in Merseyside. A surprising number of sites excavated in the expectation of recovering medieval remains have produced Roman material, either at or close to the medieval site. In a region where Roman pottery use was relatively low, the occurrence of even one or two sherds is a potential valuable indicator of activity and settlement. Small quantities of Roman pottery have been excavated at Roby Road, Roby (five sherds at the medieval borough site), one sherd in Prescott vicarage garden within the medieval borough, and five sherds at Meadow Lane, West Derby on a site adjacent to the Norman motte and bailey castle. Church Farm, Bidston and Ince Manor, near Stanlow in Cheshire, both at the core of medieval settlements, have also produced assemblages of Romano-British pottery which though small are sufficiently consistent to indicate settlement. Hoylake Road, Moreton, Wirral produced a Romano-British sherd and a late Roman coin on a site with a probable Anglo-Saxon settlement.

Brunt Boggart and Ochre Brook in Tarbock produced Roman settlement with medieval settlement on the spot or very close by (Cowell and Philpott 2000). Given that even small quantities of Roman pottery in this region are likely to indicate settlement in the close vicinity this raises interesting questions over the connection. It may simply be coincidence that the same sites were selected independently at different times. Sites may have been chosen on topographical grounds or for the combination of factors such as drainage, water sources, communications and so on. However, the consistent occurrence of multi-period occupation suggests instead a strong measure of conservatism in the location of certain settlements. In attempting to understand the long-term processes which led to the development of the medieval settlement pattern, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the roots of some settlements lie in a much earlier period (Philpott 1999). It is significant that sites with Roman material include some prominent medieval settlements, often of early importance as late Saxon hundredal centres, later medieval markets or boroughs, or in the case of Prescott as a parish centre. Topographically well situated, they often occupy elevated and well drained sites.

Newton-le-Willows is a particularly interesting case of potential long-term settlement. In Newton three locations have produced certain or probable Roman material: a Roman amphora sherd was found at Newton Common, an amphora handle (Dressel 20) and another Romano-British sherd were discovered in excavations on a medieval burghage plot on Newton High Street in 1992 (Philpott, Speakman and Cleary forthcoming) and a probable mortarium sherd was found in investigating in the Norman motte at Castle Hill, north of Newton (Sibson 1843, opp. p. 332, fig. 4). When seen in conjunction with the field name Chesterside, which is first recorded in the 13th century and which lay close to the centre of Newton, there is good circumstantial evidence for at least Roman activity at more than one location in Newton. The creation of the 'new' village or manor (tun), probably in the 10th century AD as an administrative centre close to the ecclesiastical centre of Winwick, lies in the heart of the medieval hundred of Newton. The extensive woodland recorded in Domesday Book within the hundred has in the past led to the area being considered as backward and relatively inaccessible. The hundred itself contains a marked cluster of British place-names, within an ancient regional name, Makerfield. However, as Newton-in-Makerfield (to use the older version of the place name) lies within a concentration of Romano-British rural sites, the reverse may be the case, and it may have been a strong centre of population which survived relatively late as a British-speaking area into the Saxon period. Denise Kenyon has argued that Makerfield was an early British lordship which survived as an Anglo-Saxon territorial unit, due to lack of strong competing territorial interests in the region north of the Mersey (Kenyon 1991, 73).

The early medieval period is a particularly intractable one for archaeological techniques. The scarcity of

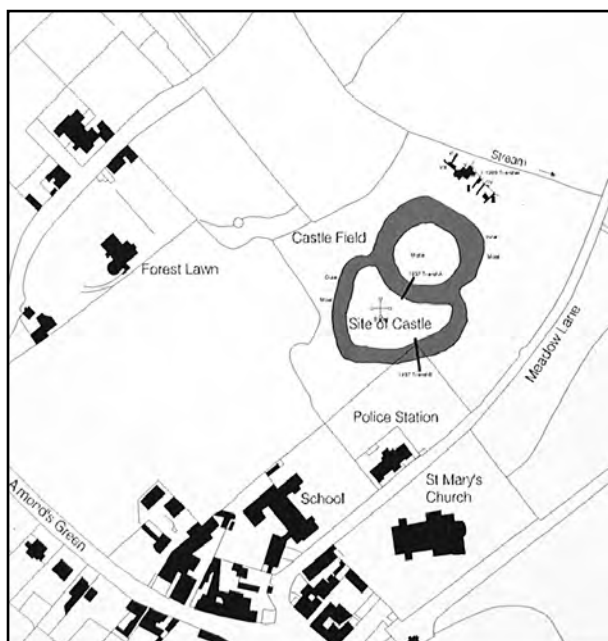


Fig. 2. Location plan of medieval structures and the castle at West Derby

diagnostic material culture, such as coins, brooches and other metalwork, as well as a long, virtually aceramic period from the 5th to 13th century, makes sites of this period particularly difficult to find. Confirmation of the dating ideally requires good stratigraphic sequences and a spread of radiocarbon dates. The recognition that the Romano-British occupation at certain sites represents only the materially visible component of long-lived settlements may prompt the direction of research towards examination of the area immediately surrounding settlements, rather than solely concentrating on the nucleus of visible settlement. The likelihood of a long-term stability and conservatism in settlement location opens up the prospect of locating post-Roman sites through examination of the surroundings of known Roman rural sites. To take one example from Merseyside, large-scale stripping of the area around the Romano-British site at Court Farm, Halewood has produced evidence of highly elusive Anglo-Saxon activity within close proximity of the Romano-British settlement.

### Later Medieval Sites

#### The Boroughs

A number of settlements in historic Lancashire developed markets and some achieved the status of boroughs through grants of burghal status either by the King, in the case of Liverpool through the letters patent of 1207, or by local lords, seeking either to derive income from existing markets or to create income through establishing new ones (Philpott 1988). At Domesday only one borough is recorded in Lancashire, at Penwortham, and the main period of development of boroughs lay in the 12th-13th centuries. The period from the 12th to mid

14th century was a time of marked population growth and a great upsurge in economic activity. Peasants increasingly required money to pay rent, fines and taxes, and their principal means of acquiring it was through sale of surplus agricultural produce. As a consequence, markets began to develop, often at places where people congregated for other reasons such as administrative centres or parish churches. Market charters were obtained from the crown by local landowners as means of profiting through taxation from otherwise unregulated economic exchange and trade. A number of markets were subsequently granted borough charters, either by landowners or the crown, who were keen to exploit their revenue-creating potential. So boroughs in some cases developed at parish centres where people engaged in trade at markets, such as Prescott, or at administrative centres such as West Derby, or were deliberately created as speculative ventures by lords of the manor, as at Roby.

Several sites were examined at settlements which had the status of boroughs at some stage in the medieval period. In each case the work was undertaken in advance of redevelopment. Two of these were at sites of considerable importance in the early post-conquest period as hundredal centres. A site on Meadow Lane, West Derby, within 50 m of the former Norman motte and bailey castle, produced a clay floor measuring at least 9.8 m long and between 3.8 and 4.2 m wide, with slight traces of a partition and a few sherds of 13th-century pottery (fig. 2, Philpott forthcoming). Little could be said of the building itself as the floor had been damaged by later ploughing and no trace of the wall material survived. However, it had been constructed over a large infilled shallow hollow, which given its proximity was probably associated with the adjacent castle. The silts of the hollow produced a Bronze Age scraper, presumably residual, and some well-preserved twigs but the lack of funds has prevented radiocarbon dating of these to determine the period of infilling. The hollow may have been a mill pond, as a water-mill which was first recorded in 1296 lay by the castle below the church (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 15). The sparse dating evidence suggests the floor dated to the later 13th century. If as seems likely the hollow silted up at the same time as the nearby castle ditches, the similarity in stratification being no coincidence (Droop and Larkin 1928), then it appears that recently drained, and still highly marginal land, was being pressed into service for habitation (fig. 3).

The location of the cottage raises a further question. The site itself was far from favourable, lying over a silted-up, former water-filled hollow. The suspicion that the site was poorly drained and would have been frequently waterlogged is confirmed by the existence of several phases of post-medieval drains cutting through the field at this point together with the recorded post-medieval field name of Moist Field.

A survey of the extensive manor of West Derby in 1323 showed that no fewer than 500 people held land in this large township, and numerous 'messuages' are mentioned,

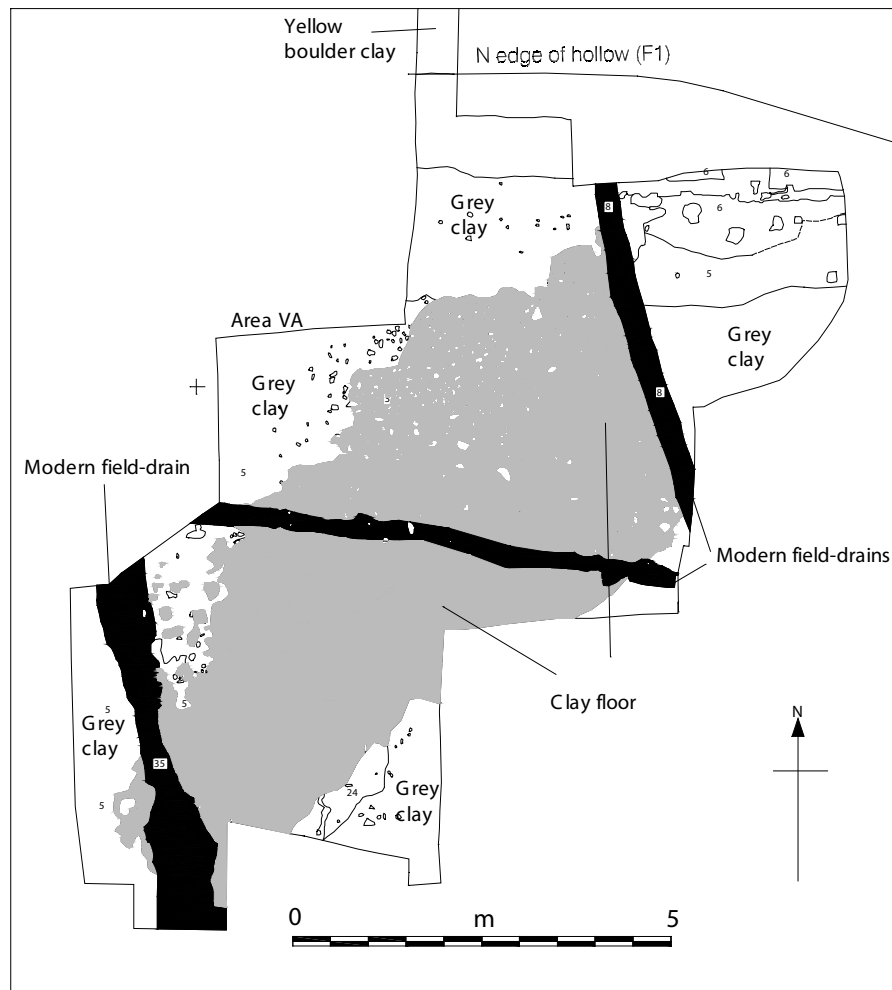


Fig. 3. Plan of a medieval structure excavated at Meadow Lane, West Derby, 1989

though none can be located precisely (Farrer 1907, 83-91). In 1298 there were at West Derby 30½ burgages in the hands of tenants, which with their associated cottages [*cum cotagiis locatis*] rendered 31s 6d, and there were eight other cottages which also belonged to Edward Earl of Lancaster (the King's brother) (Farrer 1903, 285). The medieval borough of West Derby presumably lay in the core of the nucleated settlement, probably located where the present village centre stands (Cowell 2002, 118). Some degree of pressure on agricultural land in the township can be traced in documents of the 14th century which show the taking into cultivation of woodland and waste, in response to the growing demand from a rising population (Cowell 2002, 94).

During the excavation there came to light interesting confirmation of the date of the adjacent Castle Hill, a motte mound, the medieval bridge of which had been excavated in 1927 by Droop and Larkin (Droop and Larkin 1928). On structural grounds, Stuart Rigold considered that the bridge dated to the time of Stephen (1135-54) or earlier, and contrary to the excavators' opinion the one-phase bridge should be seen as primary (1975, 64-5). A local metal-detectorist brought to the site a William I penny which had been found on the castle site (fig. 4.). The coin was the PAXS type, minted in

Bristol (M. Archibald pers. comm.) and dated to the last years of the reign of William I (1066-87). Such coins did not circulate for more than a few years before being withdrawn and the coin supports a date of the late 11th century for the initial construction of the castle. The pottery from West Derby Castle, or rather recovered from the ditches, has been re-interpreted from published evidence rather than from the finds themselves which are now lost; a late 13th or 14th century date is suggested for the material (Davey 1977b, 68-9). This is seen as rubbish disposal in the ditches rather than occupation debris from the castle itself.

Roby was one of the smaller medieval boroughs in the historic county of Lancashire. The lord of the manor, Robert de Lathom was granted a market charter in 1304 and in 1372 Sir Thomas de Lathom granted a charter making Roby a free borough (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 175). The creation of a borough at Roby in the late 14th century was perhaps a belated attempt by Thomas de Lathom to stimulate trade, and thereby bring in revenue, from local and more distant sources, as it lay close to the road between Liverpool and Prescot. Roby appears to have lost its burghal status by the end of the medieval period. The earliest estate map, dated 1785, which accompanies a survey of the estates of the Earl of Derby



Fig. 4. William I PAXS penny, minted in Bristol c. 1083-86, found on the site of West Derby castle

(LRO DDK 1770/18), shows a small settlement, little more than a hamlet, with the present site incorporated into the grounds of a large house. The site stood close to the crossroads of Roby Road, and Carr Lane, close to the place where the base of the market cross used to stand, and was redeveloped in 1990 (fig. 5). Small-scale excavations in 1990 produced pits and some structural evidence for the late medieval period after the settlement appears to have contracted (Philpott in prep.). Small areas of three probable medieval plots were examined. In the westernmost, the earliest phase of activity was represented by a small fragment of a wall line and perhaps the setting out of a boundary ditch, while a later phase saw the building of another structure of beam-slot construction on a slightly different alignment, a group of at least five large pits and a pebble surface. The large pits, which formed two complexes extending up to 25 m back from the road, suggest possible industrial activity, perhaps tanning. Dating evidence for the occupation is not precise, but it probably began in the 13th century and does not appear to survive beyond the end of the 15th century. Disuse and infilling of the pits and boundary ditch probably indicate a late medieval abandonment of settlement on the western plot. Nearly 800 sherds of pottery were recovered, including material stratified in the pits. The forms and decoration suggest late medieval wares, though the fragmentary nature of the finds makes it impossible to reconstruct complete profiles in almost all cases. Late medieval ploughing caused considerable disruption to what were already shallow features, and the plot seems to have been down to grass until the 18th century. The 19th century saw the laying down of field drains, a path and other features (fig. 6).

At Newton-le-Willows, excavations at nos 76-88 High Street, probably within a medieval burgrave plot at some distance from the core of the settlement around the church, produced two boundary ditches which contained almost exclusively medieval pottery, with traces of a post-medieval building nearby but little structural evidence for the medieval period (figs. 7 and 8). The area lay in

the back-plot at some distance from the frontage and while it confirmed that the medieval occupation of the High Street extended to the west of Rob Lane, it failed to produce medieval structural evidence. The boundary ditches corresponded with likely toft ditches of medieval date.

Prescot was one of the most important towns in south Lancashire during the medieval and early post-medieval period. Furthermore, the town has seen a considerable amount of archaeological attention through excavation and evaluation (Davey 1978; see various papers in *JMAS* 5 (for 1982-3)). Medieval pottery, including wasters, had been found during David Freke's excavations in the town on Derby Street in 1980-1 (Holgate 1983, 11-16). During the late 1980s a watching brief during construction of the large shopping centre in the town centre at Prescot had also produced some medieval pottery though it was not usefully stratified. It is particularly regrettable that such a large development took place in an important medieval centre with no formal archaeological provision. Some rescue work was undertaken by Liverpool Museum and an early post-medieval wall foundation with a deep foundation trench, was located on Kemble Street; the fill contained 16th-century pottery. More recently, work in the garden of Prescot Vicarage close to the early focal church site produced no medieval structural remains although the general soil layers did produce a small assemblage of late medieval pottery, along with a continuous run of later material. Given the foundation of the vicarage on a new site, probably on open ground adjacent to the existing church, in the mid 15th century the earliest element of the finds assemblage should probably belong to this period, with the exception of a single sherd of Romano-British pottery.

#### Moated Sites

The more visible high status sites have always tended to draw the attention of archaeologists and historians, and tend also to be better documented. Moated sites fall into this category and have benefited most notably through the work of Jen Lewis who has examined the tenurial, social and economic context for moated sites in West Derby hundred (Lewis 2000). However, despite rescue excavations on a number of sites, such as the Old Hutt in Halewood (Wrathmell 1992), Sefton Old Hall (Lewis 1978, 53-70) or Speke Hall (Higgins 1992; Davey and Speakman 1992; Lewis 1992), the areas involved have generally been restricted.

An exception was Eccleston Hall, St Helens, where two separate excavations took place, the first by Liverpool Museum in 1991, followed by a second in 1995 by Gifford and Partners of Chester. These examined much of the manorial hall site in advance of housing development. The Eccleston family are first recorded about 1200 but there is no early reference to the dwelling house. However, it may safely be assumed that a manorial dwelling existed before 1373 when the earliest surviving

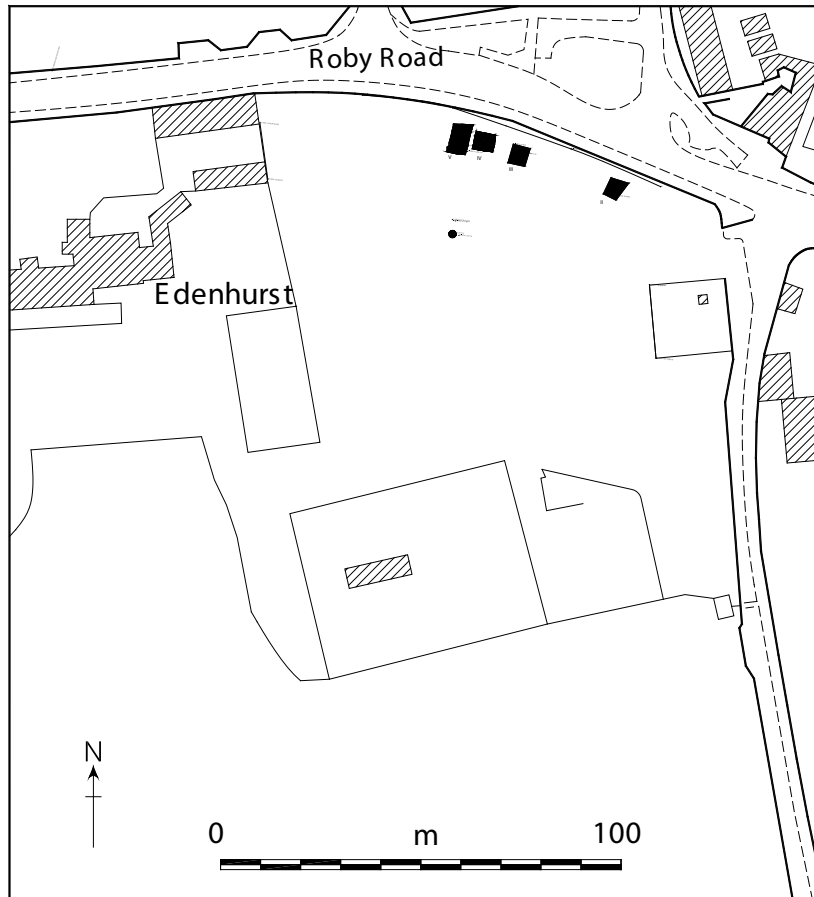


Fig. 5. Location map for excavation at Roby, 1990

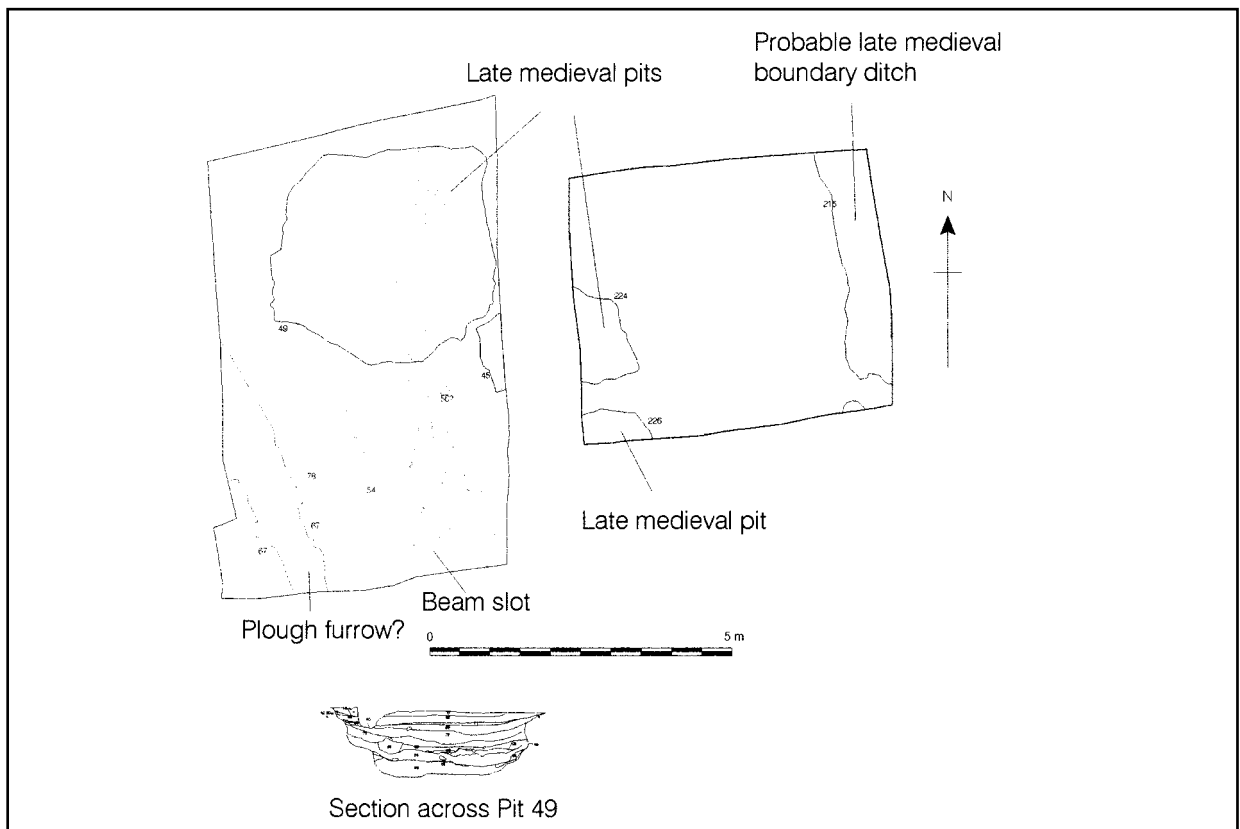


Fig. 6. Site plan of excavated features at Roby Road, Roby (Site 11, 1990)

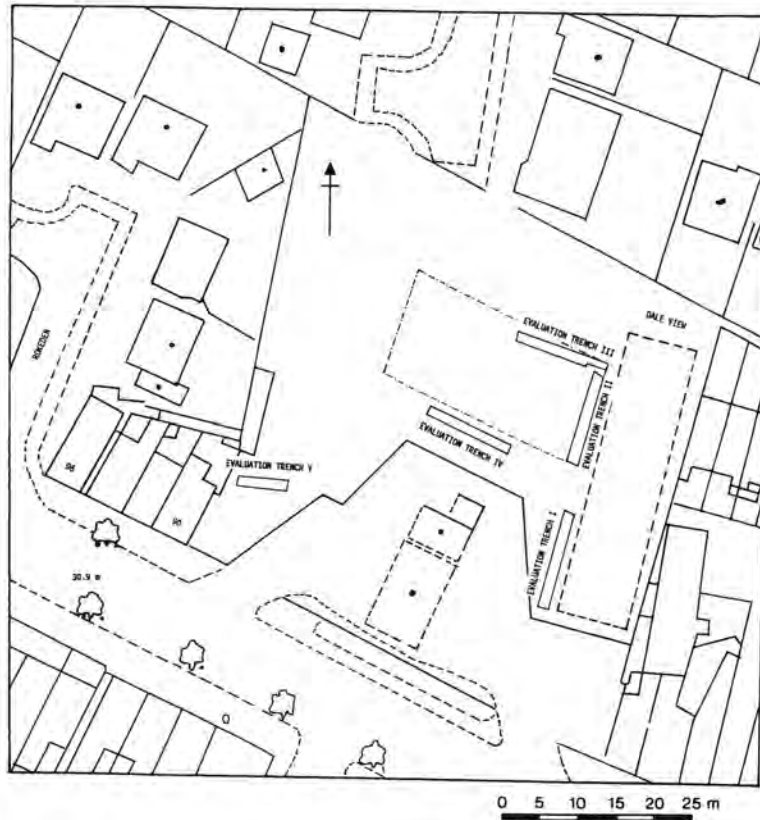


Fig. 7. Location plan of nos 76-88 High Street, Newton-le-Willows

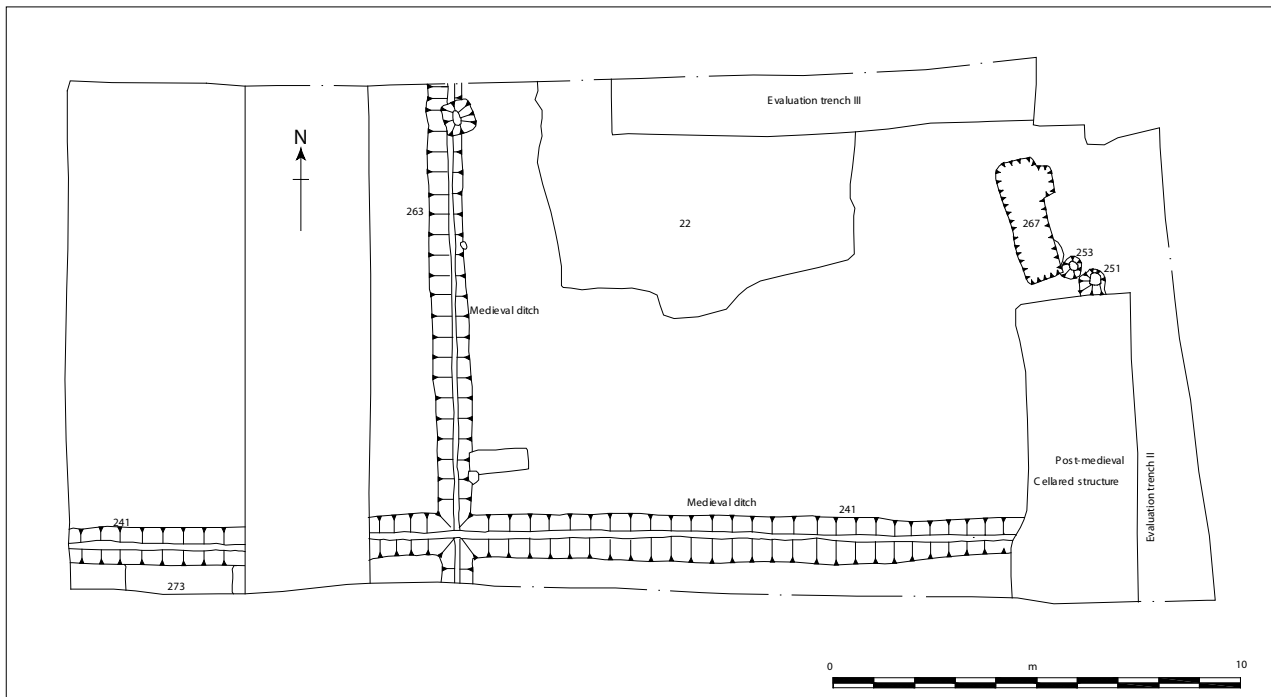


Fig. 8. Site plan of nos 76-88 High Street, Newton-le-Willows, showing medieval ditches

rental was compiled, even though the first part of the document is incomplete and it is not possible to read the first entries which would almost certainly have contained a reference to the hall. A hall was evidently in existence by 1395 when an oratory licence was granted (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 264 n. 12 cont.). The archaeological investigation produced physical evidence of an early 14th-century building, possibly the hall, in the form of discarded timbers. Dendrochronological analysis indicated that two of these timbers were probably felled in the late 1270s or early 1280s, including one roof timber, and another about 1320-30 (Groves 1993). The hall was rebuilt about 1567 by Henry Eccleston and some traces of the Elizabethan hall were recovered. The site was confirmed as moated, a possibility which had been raised by the reference to a 'gatehouse' in a document of 1720. The moat measured up to 8 m wide and over 2 m deep, with a stepped profile. Within the moated enclosure remains of one medieval structure with a sandstone sill, probably a wall foundation, was recovered. An unusual series of deep pits, probably fish ponds, produced a sequence of late medieval and early post-medieval pottery in the fills, including a number of late medieval cisterns. In an assessment of the majority of the pottery assemblage, Julie Edwards of Chester Archaeology could find only four sherds that ought to pre-date the 14th century. Either the earlier period was aceramic, or there was little activity at the site before the construction of the timber building took place in the late 13th or early 14th century.

In 1991 a small-scale excavation at Newton Hall at Newton-le-Willows revealed part of the ground plan of the post-medieval timber-framed hall, built by Thomas Blackburne in 1634. An earlier, medieval hall was thought to lie close to the post-medieval building. The early 17th-century hall is said to have been moated, and there is a suggestion from documentary sources that the building replaced an earlier stone structure which was built into the railway embankment, which lies adjacent to the site. However, a hint of earlier activity on the site was given by a feature underlying the hall containing a single sherd of medieval pottery. Trial excavation revealed a waterfilled feature which may be part of a partially infilled mill pond which lies adjacent to the hall site, or possibly part of a moat. Only further excavation will resolve the identification of the infilled water-filled feature as well as the question of the location of the pre-17th century hall.

#### *Other Rural Sites*

The pre-eminent manorial sites within the townships at Eccleston and Newton belonged to the upper stratum of the local landowning classes. At a more modest social level, are the lesser, sub-manorial estates of the freeholders who developed into the yeoman class of the post-medieval period. In St Helens, Lea Green represents one of the yeoman farms within a dispersed

settlement pattern in the township of Sutton. In 2002, an excavation was undertaken at a site which had been identified as a probable moat at Big Lea Green Farm, Sutton, south of St Helens. The investigation revealed substantial evidence for the probable 17th-century and later house with associated ditches and finds. A small quantity of late medieval pottery was also recovered. Here the earliest firm documentary evidence for the farm occurs in the late 17th century, when it belonged to Bryan Lea, but the occurrence of the Lea/Ley family name as early as the mid 16th century, and a probable connection with one Thurstan de Standish who held property in Sutton in 1376, argue for a late medieval origin for the site. Little sign of late medieval deposits was revealed, however, with only one feature producing stratified medieval pottery without later material, and the site appears to have been extensively cleared three times from the early 18th century onwards, removing earlier deposits. The feature originally interpreted as a moat appears to have been dug in the 19th century as an ornamental pond, with the farm bounded by ditches rather than a formal moat (Towle and Speakman forthcoming).

A consistent contribution of archaeology to an understanding of these sites is the demonstration of their earlier origin rather than from their recorded history. In some cases this amounts to a confirmation of what could reasonably have been predicted. At Eccleston Hall, for example, the earliest building used timber felled in the 1270s or 1280s, taking the recorded history of the site back a century. Inevitably it raises a question in turn: if there is virtually no pottery before the 14th century and the timbers date to the late 13th century, where was the house of the Eccleston family from the earliest record about 1200? At Daggars Bridge Farm the dwelling was first recorded in 1610 but can now be seen to have medieval origins, adding another medieval farm to the pattern of discrete estates within the township of Tarbock. At Big Lea Green Farm, although the archaeological work is incapable, by its very nature, of proving a direct connection with the postulated owner, nonetheless it demonstrates that the site was occupied at a time consistent with that interpretation.

An important advance has been the investigation of several lesser rural sites. For the first time in the county excavations have recovered evidence of medieval peasant buildings and the artefacts associated with them. The earlier buildings have earth-fast timber posts, a type current in England into the 13th century, while successors use new forms of construction including low dry-stone walls, clay walls or padstones to support main upright timbers (Dyer 1986, 35-40).

Ron Cowell had previously recorded a number of pottery scatters during fieldwalking in Tarbock which point to a dispersed settlement pattern within the township. At Brunt Boggart, Tarbock, the site of the largest pottery scatter yet recorded in the county, a collection of 435 sherds, was examined by excavation in advance of construction of the A5300 (fig. 9, Cowell

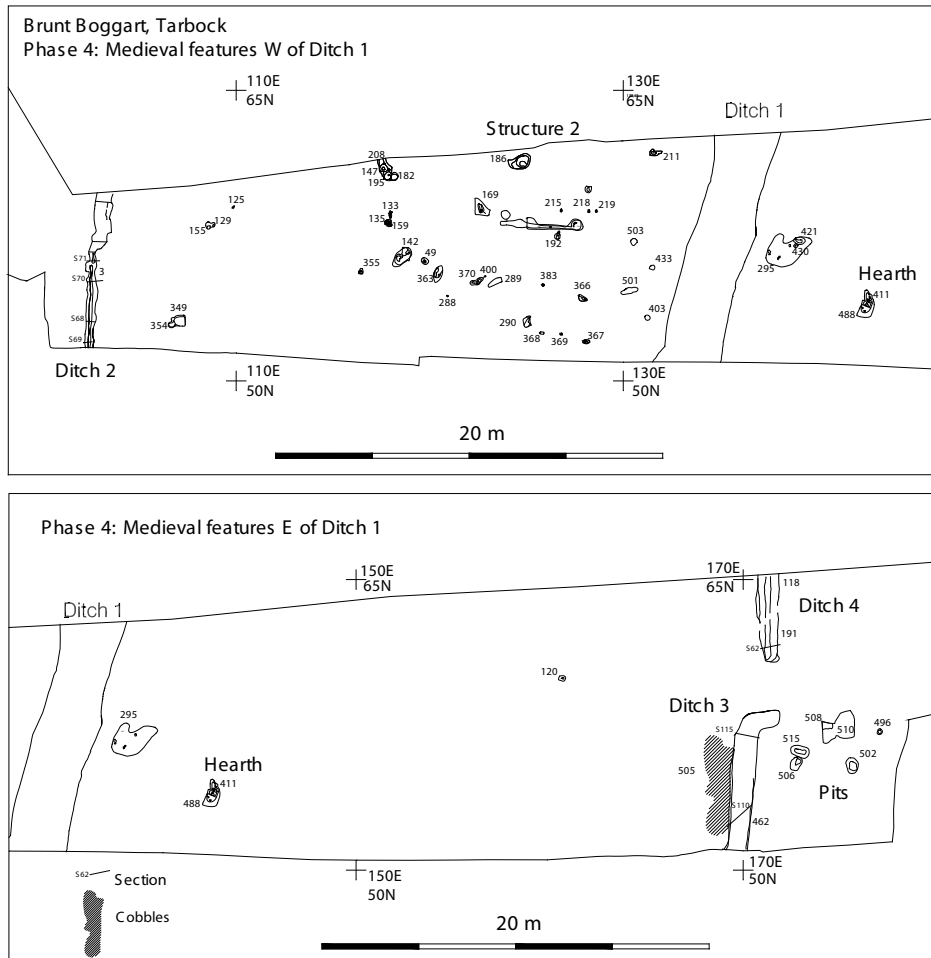


Fig. 9. Brunt Boggart, Tarbock ditched plots and building

and Philpott 2000). The excavations revealed a series of ditched plots or tofts arranged along a lane and containing one post-built structure and a series of rubbish pits (Cowell and Philpott 2000). The only medieval finds consisted of pottery, a group of 875 sherds from the excavation, which corresponded closely in distribution with the fieldwalking scatter. The strongest concentration lay around the site of the post-built structure, which was probably a cottage but had poorly defined and irregular wall alignments. The analysis of the pottery by Jeff Speakman concluded that most belonged to the 13th or early 14th century, with a distinct emphasis on jar forms rather than jugs (Speakman 2000). Many of the jars show signs of sooting, indicating that pottery was used more for food preparation rather than for tableware. The abandonment of the site probably occurred in the 14th century.

Another excavation at Ochre Brook, Tarbock, in advance of construction of the A5300 road, concentrated on a Romano-British enclosure. Close to the Roman site was a medieval one, probably on or near the later farmhouse on Daggers Bridge Lane, which had itself been demolished to construct the new road (Cowell and Philpott 2000). A series of large pits had been dug through

the Romano-British enclosure probably to extract clay. In one of these, four large pieces of medieval timber were recovered, of which one, a radially-cleft plank, had a probable felling date of *c.* 1250. Pottery from a medieval gully nearer the post-medieval farm included sherds of a green-glazed jug of 13th-14th century date. The structural timbers and gully provided the earliest evidence for a farm on this site, and suggested that the farm formed one element in the pattern of dispersed medieval settlement in Tarbock.

Fazakerley, a hamlet set on the margin of the medieval open field of Walton, was first mentioned in a charter of 1250. Map and documentary evidence suggested the hamlet survived in a series of plots on Higher Lane which had remained visible on the map until the 18th century, and in fragmentary form until the 19th century (Philpott and Emery 1994). Evaluation by Liverpool Museum's Field Archaeology Unit and subsequent area excavations by the Lancaster University Archaeological Unit north of Higher Lane revealed part of the severely contracted hamlet. This included a medieval toft containing a possible cruck-built structure and a series of pits. The toft was possibly laid out in the late 12th or early 13th century, and was later remodelled

and a pond dug. Radiocarbon dating from the earliest pond silts produced a date cal AD 1195 to 1275. The toft continued in use until at least the late 18th century. Another part of the site produced a ditched enclosure, with medieval pottery from the ditches, as well as other, undated boundary ditches (Wright 1996).

The excavation of a multi-period site at Irby, Wirral revealed a phase of later medieval activity represented by a series of stone and timber buildings, overlying the possible Anglo-Scandinavian structures discussed above. Recognition of the medieval phase was rendered particularly difficult by the swamping effect of relatively prolific Roman pottery which survived as residual material in many post-Roman deposits. In contrast the directly datable later medieval artefacts consisted of a single metal artefact, a copper-alloy key, and no more than about 30 sherds of pottery, almost all tiny and highly abraded, suggesting they had been extensively trampled after discard. Only meticulous analysis of the complex stratigraphic sequence by Mark Adams and the careful examination of the pottery by Jeff Speakman and Julie Edwards have revealed the existence of this phase of activity during the post-excavation analysis. The structures consisted of the stone rubble foundation of a rectilinear building (Structure 19), measuring at least 29 m long and 12 m wide. A second building with a stone foundation (Structure 18) and clay floor post-dated an adjacent stone building. A third medieval structure, with post-holes and stone post-pads, may have been a barn. Other features of medieval date, on stratigraphical grounds, but lacking associated artefacts, include a possible oven. The medieval structures appear to form a farm although it was not certain they were all in contemporaneous use.

The recent archaeological work has highlighted the need for a reconsideration of the structures which were observed eroding out of occupation deposits on the shore at Meols. The late 19th-century antiquarian accounts of the discovery of foundations of medieval buildings at Meols, including a 'village street' with human and animal footprints, demonstrates that the structures observed eroding out from under sand-dunes along the shore were well preserved, and accounts provide some details of the construction techniques. One building had 'floors raised by a layer of sand, on which clay was laid, and carefully puddled to a thickness of four or six inches. The walls were timber-framed, the foot of the timber resting on large rough blocks of sandstone which were let into the earth' (Potter 1890, 149). Two rectangular buildings were exposed in the summer of 1891 and were carefully observed by Edward Cox. One measured 16 by 10 feet (approx. 4.9 x 3.0m), the other 12 by 9 feet (approx. 3.6 x 2.7m). Their floors were of blue clay, and the wall foundations, one to two courses high, were of stones largely unworked but a few with tooling. The upper part of the walls were wattle and daub with rough oak posts 3-4 inches in diameter. The posts had been driven in between the stones of the wall foundations or

in some cases set into shallow sockets cut into the stones. The interiors contained nothing but hazelnut shells and, in the corner of the smaller house, a small pile of coal. Associated with each house was a midden, in which were found animal bones, fragments of iron and pieces of coarse woollen cloth and leather, including pieces of shoe with pointed toes. Between the two buildings ran a set of wheel ruts and the area was heavily marked with footprints of cattle, sheep and pigs, as well as horses with round shoes. Human footprints included two particularly well preserved ones wearing pointed shoes of medieval type. Near these first buildings were other structures, apparently long narrow 'sheds' of wattles without foundations or floors which were interpreted as cattle shelters (Cox 1896, 247-8).

The excellent preservation of timber enables details to be observed of the construction which are normally lost. Such structures would seem to belong to the 13th century or later, post-dating the shift from earth-fast posts to foundation wall and padstones (cf. Dyer 1986). The dating is confirmed to some extent by the leather shoes, which Cox placed in the 13th or 14th century, but almost all the surviving leather shoes in the Meols collection date to the late 14th or 15th century (Quita Mould 2007).

The preservation of the structural remains of the village itself owes much to the unusual circumstances of its destruction. Meols appeared to have been overtaken rapidly by a build-up of sand which engulfed not only the settlement but also its surrounding arable fields, probably around 1500. No documentary reference has yet been discovered which records this event, but the unprecedented quantity of finds, of types which were usually recycled when broken or worn out, suggests a catastrophic and rapid engulfing by blown sand. Such events were not uncommon on the sandy coasts of Britain and northern Europe in a period of increased storminess from the 13th to 18th century (Lamb 1982; 1991). At Newborough in Anglesey no fewer than 176 acres of land were engulfed by blown sand in a tremendous storm in 1331, while a storm of blown sand obliterated the centre of the medieval town of Forvie on the east coast of Scotland on 19 August 1413 (Roberts 2002; Lamb 1991, 4, 18). The documented destruction of Meols in the 19th century as wind and tide gradually removed the overlying sand-dunes and eroded the occupation deposits should urge action for archaeological monitoring of the Irish Sea coastline between the Mersey and Ribble, which is itself undergoing rapid erosion of sand-dunes in an area which saw the loss of medieval settlements such as Argarmeols to tide and sand incursions.

### *The Nature of the Archaeological Deposits*

A further emerging trend is the failure on occasions of even known documented medieval sites to produce much in the way of archaeological features, deposits or finds in the immediate vicinity. A rare surviving medieval

structure within suburban Liverpool, the monastic grange at Aigburth, was recorded by the Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Unit; here the sandstone and cruck-framed granary had formed part of the monastic grange complex (Philpott 2000). A fine series of photographs from the late 19th and early 20th century taken by James Pinnington before demolition of most of the buildings confirmed the late medieval date of the original structures. However, a watching brief under close archaeological supervision to the rear of the building in advance of construction of an extension produced some 17th and 18th-century material. Furthermore, despite its immediate proximity to a medieval building, no finds, cut features or occupation deposits connected with the monastic phase of occupation were identified. A similar picture was noted at Scholes Hall, Eccleston, where the site was recorded as early as the late 12th century and the structure contained 15th-century fabric. Here a series of 10 evaluation trenches within the curtilage of the hall, the closest no more than 50 metres away, failed to find either a single sherd of medieval pottery or a recognisable medieval feature (Ahmad and Adams 2004). In both cases a medieval occupation phase is not in doubt, but the archaeological evidence for the sites' existence at that period is absent.

### *Artefact Studies*

A detailed consideration of the study of the medieval artefacts of the area lies outside the scope of this summary. However, progress on two aspects of artefact studies, namely pottery and metalwork, deserve to be highlighted. Pottery assemblages so far, range from a handful of sherds to a thousand or so sherds for the later medieval period. Many rural sites appear to be aceramic

until the 12th or 13th century and pottery on most rural sites does not appear to become prolifically used until the post-medieval period. The steady accumulation of pottery assemblages from excavated sites has enabled the construction of an outline sequence characterising the main ware types current in the later medieval period within a broad chronological framework, at least for the area north of the Mersey. A measure of the progress made in the last quarter-century can be seen by comparison with the report edited by Peter Davey which summarised the knowledge of medieval pottery in north west England up to 1975 (Davey 1977a). Only two sites within the whole county of Merseyside had produced medieval pottery. The first was West Derby Castle excavated in the 1920s, although the material was no longer extant (Davey 1977b). The second was the 69 medieval and early post-medieval sherds from the Henry Ecroyd Smith collection, found during the 19th century at Meols, which, although thought to have been lost in the bombing of Liverpool Museum in 1941, was re-discovered in 1978. The report written in 1978 has recently undergone revision for publication (Axworthy 2007). Over 15 years ago Peter Davey assessed the current state of knowledge of the medieval ceramics from Merseyside and highlighted the new medieval material excavated from Prescott as well as finds collected in Ron Cowell's countywide fieldwalking programme, though the dearth of finds from medieval sites was also remarked (Davey 1991). Since then, there has been an encouraging increase in new assemblages available for study. Roby and Eccleston Hall together have added over a thousand sherds to the total, the value of which is greatly enhanced by the presence of stratified groups. The work of Anna Slowikowski on the pottery from the

*Fig. 10. Description of later medieval finds found on the shore at Great Meols (see aside)*

- 140 Elaborate clasp, late 13th-early 14th century
- 396 Lead-tin buckle, late 13th-14th century
- 1729 Lead-tin mount, with letters SY,
- 1367 Pendent loop, with rudimentary figurative decoration, 14th century
- 2792 Leather belt with decoration formed by small rods, probably reading 'Be meri'
- 119 Cast copper-alloy purse suspender, late 13th-early 15th century
- 754 Oval lead-tin strap loop
- 1974 Openwork, moulded buckle, with bird of prey; probably Yorkist falcon-in-fetterlock badge, 15th century
- 805 Copper-alloy brooch, late 12th-early 13th century
- 95 Septfoil brooch, possibly never worn
- 849 Lead-tin quatrefoil brooch, with central beaded bar
- 92 Silver (pen) annular brooch with grooved decoration
- 1916 Pilgrim sign in form of axe head
- 1761 Lead cross, either a crude dress accessory or an ingot
- 105 Personal seal, with stylised foliage, pair of birds and hare crouching below. 'seal of Nicholas of [uncertain place].... the cleric'
- 1092 Mirror case in two leaves with openwork cross and letters (a magic formula?)
- 287 A collar or necklace chain in lead tin, with cabled chain links and pendent stylised vine leaves
- 212 Copper-alloy barbed fishhook, probably late medieval or post-medieval
- 27 Copper-alloy sheet metal casket key, probably a replacement for lost original, late 12th-late 14th century
- 80 Lead-tin scale tang knife handle, with inscription, late 15th or early 16th century
- 1973 Buckle with oval frame. An unfinished piece, with untrimmed sprues. 14th century

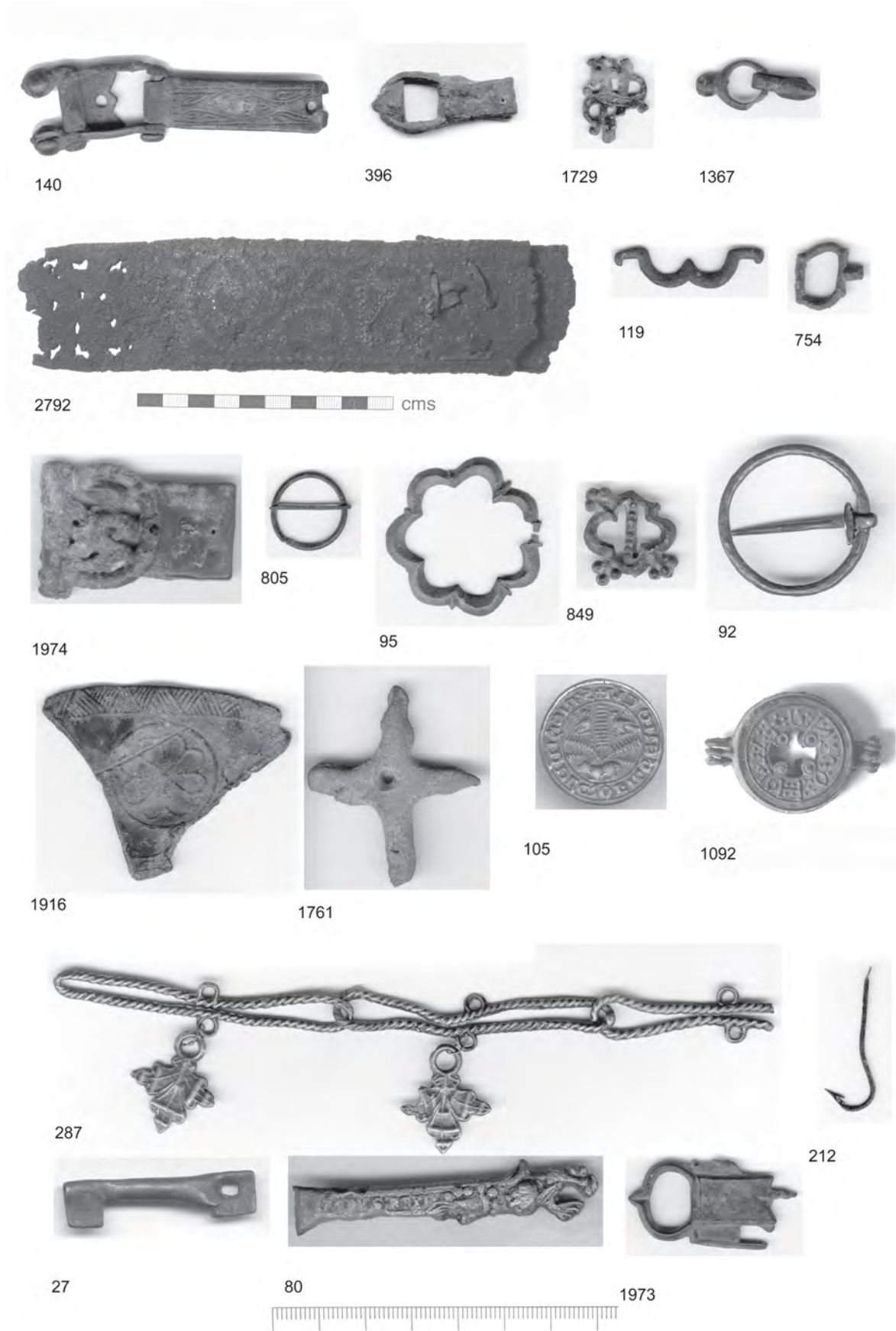


Fig. 10. A selection of later medieval finds found on the shore at Great Meols (all identifications and dating courtesy of Geoff Egan)

moated site of the Old Hutt at Halewood, excavated in the 1960s (Slowikowski 1992), and Jeff Speakman (2000) on the highly fragmented and unpromising Brunt Boggart material have proved most valuable in establishing a benchmark against which fresh material can be assessed.

Another aspect is in one respect a paradox. Most excavated sites present an apparently impoverished visible material culture. In contrast with the pottery, metal finds of medieval and even post-medieval date are at best scarce but more often non-existent on excavated sites. Metal detector finds within the county, or indeed the wider north west region extending from Cheshire to Cumbria, run at a very low level compared with almost all other regions of England. The Portable Antiquities Scheme recorded a total of 158 medieval objects in the period 2000-03 for the whole of north west England against over 992 for the West Midlands and 354 for Yorkshire (Portable Antiquities Scheme 2003, 66, Table 5). A straightforward comparison is obviously misleading, as it fails to take account of variable factors such as intensity of detecting, levels of reporting, crop regimes and the relative size of the areas. However, there is strong anecdotal support for the comparative poverty in material terms of north west England.

Against a background of a generally low level of metal finds, the series of medieval artefacts from the shore at Meols represents a remarkable contrast. Meols has produced one particular rural assemblage from the Wirral shore at Meols of such size that it dwarfs the metalwork assemblages from some of the most important medieval sites of England, such as York, Norwich or Winchester (fig 10, Egan 2007). The finds were revealed during the 19th century through coastal erosion (Hume 1863; Chitty and Warhurst 1977). Over 2500 objects of medieval date survive in five modern museum collections and a collaborative project based in Liverpool Museum has recently catalogued the material for publication (Griffiths 2001; Griffiths *et al.* 2007). Re-examination of the medieval and post-medieval non-ferrous metal objects by Dr Geoff Egan of the Museum of London Specialist Services has produced a series of fascinating new insights into the material, not least the recognition that for certain categories of find the collection is second only to London in size and significance (Egan 2007). The anaerobic ground conditions were responsible for preserving a fine series of lead-tin pieces which in most soils vanish without trace. The subsequent 'sieving' of the site by the tidal erosion deposited the objects on the shore where they were found by antiquarian collectors. The assemblage has shed new light on the range and quantity of small metal objects which would be in use in a small and otherwise unremarkable late medieval village. These include buckles and belt fittings, keys, brooches, rings, as well as agricultural tools, hunting equipment such as arrow heads, and personal items such as seals. The ironwork includes a fine series of 127 late medieval knives, some with makers' marks revealed by X-radiography (Ottaway 2007). A study of the coins by

Simon Bean has shown continuous activity from the late Saxon period to the 14th century, although the decline in coins after 1351 which had been thought to signal the sudden abandonment of the settlement (e.g. Chitty and Warhurst 1977), is not in fact such a sharp drop when viewed against the national pattern of coin minting and subsequent loss. There are many small denominations amongst the medieval coins, with numerous cut halfpennies and farthings, as well as a number of Scottish and Irish pieces. The finds are suggestive of a high volume of small-scale transactions involving low denomination coins at the port; such tiny fragments were easily lost and less easily recovered by the owner. A further consequence of the study of all types of artefact has been to confirm the integrity of the assemblage, over which doubts had in the past been expressed, with virtually no evidence of intrusive or 'added' material (G. Egan pers. comm.).

### ***Future Research***

The recent English Heritage-sponsored initiative on regional research frameworks has summarised current research on the medieval period in north west England as a whole, from Cheshire to Cumbria. This provides a wider regional context against which Merseyside can be considered, and identifies a number of gaps and omissions in our knowledge of the region as a whole.

For the future, an urgent priority must be a programme of research which sets out to examine the origins and development of the region's medieval settlements. Although for reasons outlined above it is difficult to trace a coherent narrative through the work of the last decades, nevertheless some themes have emerged from the work. One aspect which has emerged during the last decades has been a steady accumulation of evidence for repeated settlement on the same location, often over a long chronological time-frame. By itself each discovery of a handful of Roman pottery sherds on a medieval site carried little weight. Increasingly, as further examples are found at different sites the strength of the correlation grows, suggesting a consistent relationship between some Romano-British and medieval sites. Together these have added substantially to our understanding of some aspects of medieval settlement in the area.

For the nucleated towns and villages this requires careful examination of a large sample of plots within the core of medieval settlements to recover the kind of detailed artefactual and structural evidence for structures and stratified artefacts which is only possible through excavation. The restricted area available for excavation and the likelihood of disturbance of earlier deposits by later activity means that the yield of information may not always be high. However, there is a multitude of individual small plots within medieval towns and villages where redevelopment is gradually revealing the archaeological fabric of the settlements. By itself each plot may have little to contribute to the wider picture,

but the cumulative effect of shreds of evidence from numerous small interventions may allow the larger picture to emerge.

Apart from the academic interest in the question of settlement origins there is a modern social dimension too. Investigation of plots in known early settlements is the only way to solve the question of the origins of many of the communities which exist today. The growing public interest in origins and history of communities places an additional responsibility on the archaeological profession to meet these demands. On occasion well-preserved stratified deposits may yield evidence of settlement origins. However, in this landscape where dispersed sites form the major settlement component the origins of discrete farmsteads remain obscure, and if anything more difficult to disentangle. Studies of place-names, documents and later maps all have a vital role to play in locating sites and setting them within an administrative and tenurial framework. A further methodological development is required in order to ensure that the relatively ephemeral and potentially widely scattered remains of habitation in areas of dispersed settlement are considered through a wide-ranging investigation of broad areas of landscape. Large green-field developments in areas of no known archaeological potential (a circumstance which almost invariably equates to areas of no known archaeological research) require extensive topsoil stripping to be certain that patterns of settlement which do not lend themselves to easy identification are not completely ignored in the planning process.

At the level of the individual building, the current tally of excavated buildings is characterised in general by highly fragmentary, poorly preserved and not well dated structures. It is to be hoped that future excavations will enable the rather inadequate data to be set within a coherent regional framework where the development of peasant houses and ancillary buildings can be considered in the context of better known regions; neither urban nor rural housing are well understood from the county and there is much scope for fresh work to improve the data set. The excavation of a much larger sample of rural peasant houses is required from the county, and indeed north west England as a whole, before the regional development and chronology of vernacular architecture can be written.

A coordinated study of the pottery of the historic south-west Lancashire and Wirral is required to place the newly acquired finds in a geographical, typological and chronological framework. A high priority must be the identification and investigation of production sites to understand the location, range and forms of particular industries allied with examination of stratified sequences to refine the poorly calibrated chronology of medieval pottery. There is an urgent need for securely stratified groups of pottery, ideally from datable contexts, in order to refine an understanding of the fabrics, the typology and chronology of the local wares. One potential major contribution to that effort is the unfinished study of the

pottery from Eccleston Hall where preliminary work has indicated a well-stratified late medieval to post-medieval sequence. A series of water-filled features, probably fish ponds, had been used for the dumping of late medieval material including a number of bung-hole pitchers of probable 15th-century date. The final analysis of this material should provide perhaps the best stratified sequence yet from the late medieval to later post-medieval period in Merseyside. This needs to be complemented by a range of groups to determine the full range of wares and forms in use across the social spectrum, and also over the full geographical range. This is not a problem unique to Merseyside but is one which targeted research work is capable of resolving in time.

In addition, the full analysis of fieldwalking material from the 1980s and 1990s in Liverpool Museum, in the light of increased understanding of the medieval pottery fabrics of the region, will assist in plotting the distributions of different ware types, and in identifying and locating medieval sites which have left no documentary or cartographic record, as was demonstrated so successfully at Brunt Boggart.

The study of non-ceramic artefacts will be enhanced dramatically within the region by the publication of the Meols material. Although the non-ferrous metalwork has proved to indicate a high degree of standardisation in form across the country, detailed study has isolated certain regional or local types, and has indicated the presence of some prestigious items amongst the more mundane household equipment and dress fittings (Egan 2007). Furthermore the sheer volume of medieval metalwork and other finds from Meols raises questions over the level of material in the possession of medieval households, and suggests that the typical assemblage from archaeological excavations is a highly selective sample of the material originally in use at any one time. The study of the Meols material is a project of national importance and has profound implications for an understanding of society and material culture in the medieval period.

In the era of PPG16 where archaeological remains are protected through formal development control procedures, the *ad hoc* rescue approach, inadequately funded and limited in scope, which characterised the work of the 1980s should be a thing of the past. It is no longer considered acceptable for large swathes in the centre of our historic settlements to be removed, such as happened in Prescott in the early 1980s, without a considered programme of archaeological investigation and monitoring. The nature of many of the towns and villages, with a history of continuous settlement, means that only rarely are large areas available for redevelopment.

It is to be hoped that the forthcoming research frameworks exercise promoted by English Heritage (Brennand 2006) will strengthen the research basis for the medieval period, not only by identifying gaps and themes but also by creating a coherent structure within which the study of medieval peoples, settlements and

material culture in north west England can be set.

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