Moated Site at Halewood

The History of the Site.

The site involved was at Yew Tree House, Higher Road, Halewood, (SJ48NW15 at 4405822). 'Henry II afforested Halewood, placing in defence all Halewood between the Flaxpool and the Quintbridge. In 1203, King John granted Hale with Halewood to Richard of Meath, one of the clerks of the exchequer, but this was probably only as hunting rights were reserved. In 1334, and for long after, Halewood was part of the hunting zone together with Simonswood, Smeedon, Toxteth and Croxteth - the full legal forest of Lancaster. The date of disafforestation is vague but probably occurred before the end of the 14th century.' (The Royal Forest of Lancaster, by R. Cunliffe Shaw).

Fig. 1 Tithe Map 1840

The earliest map showing the site that has so far been traced is a tithe map of 9th March, 1840, in the Preston Record Office, (Figure 1). In the Articles and Agreements the landowner is recorded as John Tarleton and the occupier as Thomas Atherton. Only three sides of the moat are marked with double lines. The layout of the boundaries of 279 on the tithe map led Peter Davey to suggest that there might well have been an extension of the moat southwards. It was too late for us to check this as the foundations for two houses and the access road had already been built in this area. However, some corroboration comes from a conversation we had with the Hi-mac driver. He told us that when he was putting in the drains for these houses he had gone through a ditch like that on the east side of the moat, (i.e. about 2 metres deep), with the same soft dark fill. It lay approximately on a line joining the front of Yew Tree House and the large tree in the garden of the next house in Higher Road.
Three sides of the moat are also marked on the OS 6" Map of 1849, (Figure 2). The OS 25" sheet of 1891 shows part of the west side of the moat open (Figure 3). This latter is also marked on the OS 6" sheets of 1925 and 1938. The site was first recorded by the Ordnance Survey Archaeological Division in 1976. The entry for the site also records that the moat was filled in before 1925.

Investigation of the Site.

Outline planning permission for the site was given in 1974, but detailed planning permission was not given until 1976. Work must have begun on the site almost immediately because by the 2nd March all trees and hedges had been grubbed out and large amounts of topsoil had already been moved about. It was too late for any investigation of the interior of the moated area to take place so work was concentrated on locating the northern section of the moat and on recording the evidence from the mechanical sections kindly dug for us by Wimpey's.
Mechanical Sections

1. Mr. Simpson of Yew Tree House told us that in a section put through by the Hi-mac machine at his instigation on the south side of the moat towards the S.W. corner, the moat was stone lined on sides and base, that the bottom of the moat had been filled with black humic material as in 2 below, and included some timbers of considerable size. He showed us two oak beams that he had removed. These have been sectioned by the Biology Department of Liverpool Polytechnic who are carrying out a three year research programme to build up a dendrochronological table for the North West. Mr. Simpson made no mention of any other finds like those which occurred in large numbers in section 2.

2. (See Plan, Figure 5 and Section, Figure 4). This was put through on the south side of the moat across the line of the access road. The fill was of a very mixed rubble, red brick near the top, yellow clay and loam mixed, very sticky but much relatively recent building debris. Both sides of the moat were lined with roughly faced sandstone, no mortar, for about 3 metres to the base of the moat which was cut into natural yellow clay. At the bottom for about half a metre the moat was filled with very black humic material, vegetation, and general debris of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This included many glass and stoneware bottles, harness and plough equipment, leather shoes, belts and straps.

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Figure 4: East Section of E-W trench: Scale 1/25

Legend:
- sand
- loam
- demolition
- oily layer
- stone
- ceramic
- bottle
- metal

Natural yellow clay
3. (See Plan, Fig. 4). This was put through on the west side of the moat across the line of the access road. This section was of a very different character. Although some very loose red sandstone rubble appeared on the east side of the section, there was nothing like the deliberate stone lining of the section on the south side. The fill was of a very clean loamy nature. No finds were noted. The final section was shallower and considerably greater in width than that on the south side. It was cut into natural clay. The Hi-mac driver commented that the feel of the fill was quite different from that in section 2 and that it was much softer and looser.

3(a) Two weeks later the Hi-mac driver removed another 3 metre wide section through the west side of the moat immediately to the south of section 3. This had the same general features. We observed two field drains low down in the section; from the half metre of fill below these came two rim sherds and one base sherd of manganese pottery, early 18th century in date.

Investigation of the rest of the site

Because it was too late for any investigation of the interior of the moated area to take place we do not know whether it originally contained a building or not. The movement of the topsoil had, however, revealed a T-shaped drain (see Plan). It consisted of a scoop in the soil lined with rubbly sandstone with a capping of dressed sandstone slabs. The junction of the drain lay approximately in the centre of the moated area. We traced the western area arm to where it ran into the western side of the moat. The eastern arm of the drain was cut by a brick built structure associated with the farm. The southern arm of the drain stopped short of the stone lined section on the south side of the moat, but was apparently linked to it by a clay filled drain. We located the north side of the moat and the approximate length, width and position of the N.W. corner (See Fig. 4). The whole area was very much disturbed because of the movement of the heavy machinery on the site. The fill of the ditches at the edges was dark but most of the width in the areas we looked at was sealed by a layer of clay. This had occurred recently because beneath it were such things as chicken wire. From the dark fill about half a metre below the then surface came a rim sherd of 16th century date. Even this layer, however, was disturbed as it also contained 17th and 18th century material. We still have no positive evidence for the exact position of the east side of the moat.

Conclusions

We have no evidence for the use of the site, or of any buildings which might have been associated with it. From evidence found at similar sites in the north west we could expect the moat to have been dug originally in the 14th or 15th centuries, but we have no evidence as yet for this from Halewood. The earliest material we found was a rim sherd of the 16th century, but there was a number of sherds of late 17th or early 18th century pottery. The vast bulk of the finds however, was of late 19th and early 20th century date. Walking the site and inspection of the soil dumps failed to produce any medieval finds.
The presence of 19th century clay field drains near the bottom of the west side of the moat left only half a metre of apparently undisturbed fill. The stone lined section on the south side of the moat we looked at, is the section left open until the 1920’s. It was presumably a 19th century recutting of the moat, as it is considerably narrower than the other two sides of the moat which we located. The edge of the original moat may have been where the sandstone drain ended but this was not checked.

**Implications of this site for the future**

The archaeological importance of this site, a previously undisturbed moated site, has already been pointed out (P.3). Enough time lapsed between the granting of outline planning permission and detailed planning permission to have allowed adequate investigation before disturbance of the site had taken place. It is quite unrealistic to expect the sort of evidence needed to build up records of life and past environments on Merseyside to be found on an already disturbed site. It is also totally unfair to whoever has been given permission to develop a site to upset their work schedules to allow last minute retrieval of evidence.

Merseyside has until recently lacked any organised archaeological organisation and manpower. Recent developments are therefore most welcome particularly when linked to the increasing official and public consciousness concerning archaeology.

We have not such a wealth of archaeological sites on Merseyside that we can afford to let those remaining slip quietly into the hands of the developers without investigating them first.

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Margaret Warhurst

Cleaning the north-west corner; looking south along west section of the moat.
Boundary of Yew Tree House property
Probable line of moat from 1849 6" O.S. and 1840 tithe maps
Area excavated by machine
Waterfilled sections of moat visible on 1893 25" O.S.

Present standing buildings
(including new development)