

South Castle Street 1976 : Interim Report

The Site

Liverpool's medieval castle formerly stood on the site of Derby Square. By the eighteenth century it had been replaced by St. George's Church, commenced in 1726 and completed in 1734. At the turn of the last century (1899-19) the church was demolished and the castle site used to house the Queen Victoria Memorial.

The Excavation

The proposal to begin work on the city's new Crown Courts by September 1976 threatened a large area immediately south of the castle and overlying modern South Castle Street - the route of the earlier Pool Lane.

In the absence of a professional rescue archaeology unit on Merseyside excavation of part of the threatened area was undertaken by the embryonic Merseyside Archaeological Society with the backing of Merseyside County Museums and a generous emergency grant of £1,000 from the Department of the Environment. Diggers were volunteers drawn from the Society, from the Worker's Educational Association and extra-mural classes and from the archaeology departments of Liverpool and some other Universities. As the excavation coincided with the hottest summer weather on record and finished, ironically, in exceptionally heavy rain, their stamina was to be commended. The excavation had the help and co-operation of several bodies including the contractors, W. Tysons, the City Surveyors, the GPO, and the Institute of Extension Studies, who made available equipment and other facilities.

With only six weeks available for work an area 30 metres by 16 metres was opened at the northern end of South Castle Street (Map SJ34319019) in the hopes of finding the medieval road thought to have run from the castle to the pool, together with any buildings which may have stood alongside it. (The modern road was flanked by the bombed remains of shops and warehouses whose rubble filled cellars appeared to have been cut into rock and would have been too costly and time-consuming to clear.)

Before proper excavation could begin five successive road surfaces had to be lifted and a whole network of tramlines burned through. The melting tarmac, twisted metal and hundreds of granite sets were enough to dismay even the most stout-hearted and were all the more galling because clearing them wasted a week of work and took nearly half the grant in plant hire.

A sewer trench 3.45 metres wide and over 3 metres deep ran down the eastern side of the site and had also to be investigated before further work could proceed.

Structures and Finds

The lowest road was found to be laid directly on natural sandstone - the castle had been built on a rocky outcrop which had been levelled on its demolition. Only structures cut into the rock had survived this levelling. There were no traces of a medieval road nor of any medieval buildings.

The earliest feature encountered was the lower part of a ditch system of mid-seventeenth century date, almost certainly part of earthwork defences, constructed during the Civil War. Of the other features many appeared to be associated with the market which was held in the area after the Civil War and which remained there until the building of St. George's Church. The most interesting structures identified were the cellars of the fish market, part of a wooden lock-up or bridewell, the site of the stocks (which gave their name to the market) and traces of actual market stalls.

The fish market in particular produced thousands of finds. The cellars were full of oyster, cockle and limpet shells, animal bones, pottery, clay pipes, wine bottles and window glass - the debris of an eighteenth century equivalent of a Liverpool fish and chip shop.

Among the animal bones in the main demolition layer of the fish market were the remains of cows, pigs, sheep and chickens, two cats, a rodent, two puppies, an egg, a horse and a sparrowhawk.

Fragments of pottery from the fish market, lock-up and stocks site fitted each other, demonstrating that the whole area had been flattened and cleared at the same time, sometime between 1729 and the consecration of the nearby St. George's Church 1734.

The next step

The importance of the finds in addition to providing a starting point for any future archaeological research, is the picture they give of seventeenth and eighteenth century Liverpool, at a time when the town was on the eve of its great expansion. The pottery alone had come not only from places like Staffordshire and Devon but from as far afield as Spain, Germany, Italy and even China.

The importance of the excavation - the first in Liverpool since the excavation of West Derby Castle in 1927 - is that it has clearly shown the archaeological potential of the old heart of Liverpool. It suggests that the next step should be a comprehensive archaeological implications survey of the whole of early Liverpool in order to locate sites for future excavations.

Peter Davey.



Early 18th

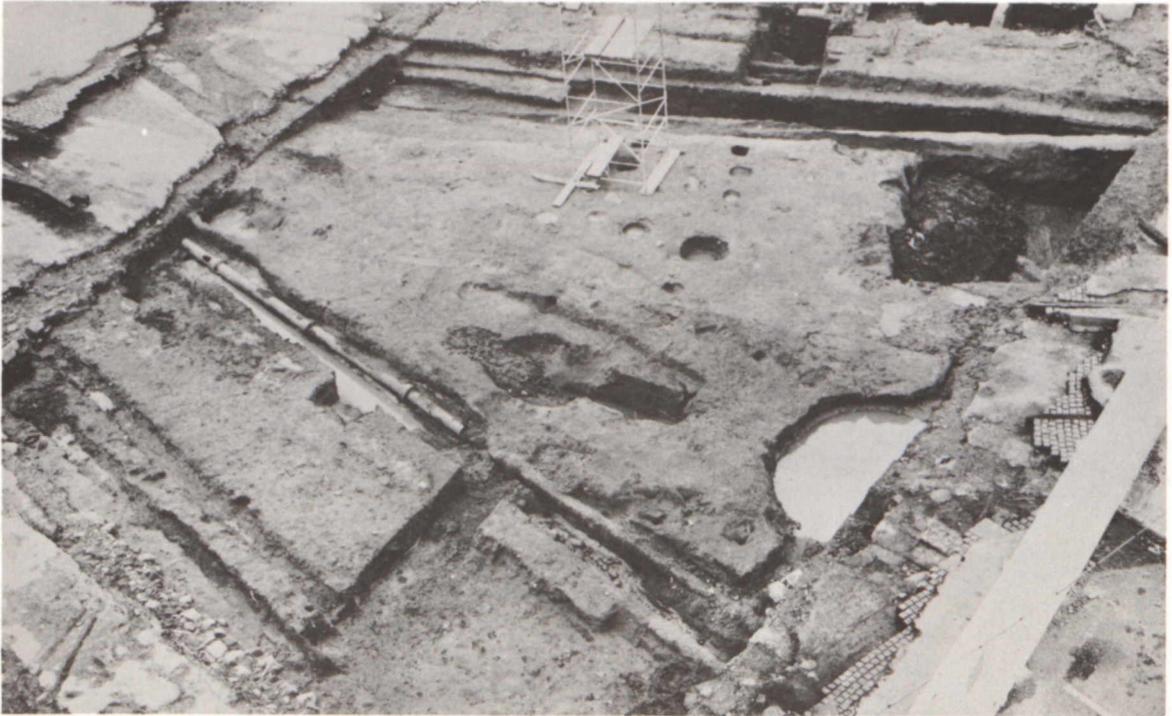


Fig. 1. View of the site showing features of the market area including the bridewell and the site of the stocks.



Fig. 2 South Castle Street: Cellars of the Fish Market.

South Castle Street 1976: some of the finds.



Fig. 3. Slipware cups – eighteenth century



Fig. 4 Fragments of Delft ware.

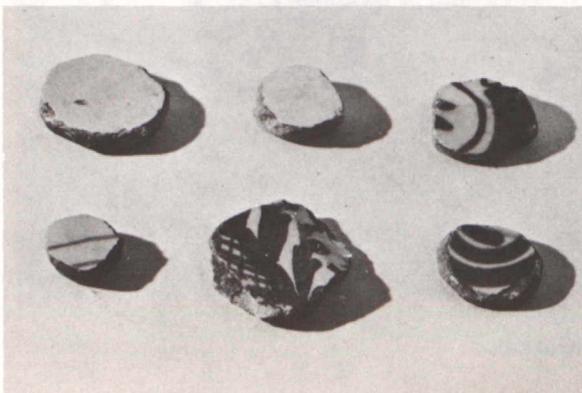


Fig. 5. Delft ware counters.