

# Irby Mill Excavations 1979

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Early in 1979 the society's attention was drawn by Mr J T O'Neil to the proposed development of a post mill site at Irby Mill Hill in Greasby. The mill itself had been demolished, but the mill cottage remained and permission was being sought to convert this into a public house. Planning permission was finally granted to Higsons Brewery in March and a site meeting was arranged for the Wirral Field Work Group with the architect, Mr W Hardman. It was explained that the development of the site would involve the demolition of the derelict south-wing of the cottage, built in the 1920s, and the landscaping of the area west and north of the cottage to provide space for car parking. The latter would destroy any evidence which remained of the mill site. As the Wirral Field Work Group was engaged on a survey of mill sites in Wirral during the summer, this seemed an appropriate opportunity to examine a mill site by excavation. The proposal received every cooperation from the architect and contractors, and the site was excavated during three weeks at the end of July. The documentary work summarised below was drawn together in the interim period.

## **Irby Mill: the historical evidence**

The windmill appears to have occupied two sites at different periods in its history: the earlier one is said to have been 'well up the hill to the south of the now ruined one about 100 yards away' (Abraham 1905, 144). The first site from this description would have lain in Irby township, the boundary between Irby and Greasby townships lying along Hillbark Road (see figure 1). The later site, which was that excavated, lies in Greasby township, but both sites are within Thurstaston parish.

## **The medieval site**

The Taxation of Pope Nicholas IV c 1291 (Hist Mss Comm 1802, 258) contains the first known reference to a mill in Irby: '*Taxacio bonor' temporalm Abbis Cestr' in Decanat' de Wyrhale . . . Item het apud Yrby . . . Et het ibm unu' molin' ad ventu' & val p annu' 0-10-0'*'. It is evident that it formed part of the possessions of the Abbey of St Werburgh in Chester to which Irby and Greasby had been given in 1093 by Hugh Lupus (Ormerod 1882, II, 510). A rental of St Werburghs for 1431/2 states that 'The tenants of Irby, Greasby, Woodchurch and Noctorum with those of the monks of Frankby, must grind



*Figure 3: Irby Mill*

at Irby Mill to the 16th measure (ie they must give a sixteenth of the flour to the miller as toll) and convey millstones from Little Christleton to the said mill, and must repair the earthwork (*opus terrenum*) of the mill as may be needful' (Brownbill 1928, 284, quoting PRO Rentals and Surveys Roll 901). The Chartulary of St Werburgh's records that land in Little Christleton was given to the Abbey by Leticia de Malpas at some time between 1121 and 1129 (Tait 1920, 33) and a local variety of the ferruginous sandstone may have provided a more suitable material for millstones than any readily available from Wirral.

St Werburgh's Abbey was surrendered on 20 January 1540. For some years before this the Abbot had been granting unusually long leases on various monastic properties, and by an indenture of 10 September 1538, Abbot Thomas Clarke granted a 61 year lease to 'Thomas Birkheved' for, among other places, Hilbre Island and 'one Wyndemyne called Ireby Mylne, with the appurtenances to the same belonging paying . . . yearly to the Abbot and Convent . . . for the said mill, forty shillings'. The provisions placed upon the St Werburgh's community the obligation for 'all necessary reparacons that herafter shall happe in and upon the said mylne upon their own proper costes, that is to say mylne-stones, tymber werke and tymber for the same, ironwerke and iron for the same, cogges and ronges only of the same and seyll clothes' (*Sheaf* 3 ser, vol 32, June 1937 (7133), 52-3).

After the Dissolution, Irby was granted to the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral Church of Chester in the endowment of the latter on 4 August 1541 (*Sheaf* 3 ser, vol 2, Jan 1898 (137), 7). General references to Irby occur in leases, rentals and associated documents (ChRO refs EEC and ACC 1205 DPD) but references to the mill itself are rare and not all the Dean and Chapter records have survived in their original form. An extract from a 97 year lease granted on 13 March 1552 by the Dean and Chapter to Rowland Stanley, in consideration for the surrender of the Thomas Birkenhead lease, granted in 1538, was published in *Sheaf* (3 ser, vol 4 April 1902 (624), 44, quoting B M Harleian Mss No 1994, f.409b). The 1552 lease included 'their Windy Milne called Irby Milne'. A later reference to the same leases of 1538 and 1552 was made in a Court of Exchequer document of 28 October 1634/44 (*Sheaf* 3 ser, vol 6, Oct 17 1906 (1143), 84, quoting B M Harleian Mss No 2009, f.337) which repeated the list of Boardland tithes and ' . . . one wynde-mill in Irby . . . cald Irby Mill'.

During the Commonwealth period Deans and Chapters of Cathedrals were abolished. The Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 meant a similar restoration of Deans and Chapters and a fresh granting of leases. On 29 November 1660 a 21 year lease of Hilbre Island, various Boardland tithes and 'also all that Milne in Irby . . . called Irby milne with all the tolls and mulctures thereunto belonging' was granted to William Stanley (*Sheaf* 3 ser, vol 5 June 3 1903 (841), 52). The next specific reference to the mill is to be found in the will of Edward Glegge of Grange, 10 November 1684, ' . . . all my purchased lands in and about Irby with the windmill there' (ChRO WS; Beazley 1926, 49).

The extant registers for Thurstaston parish begin in 1706 (ChRO ref P48/1/1). The Bishop's Transcripts date from 1581 (ChRO ref EDB BTs Thurstaston). Townships and occupations are occasionally entered but not consistently. The following transcript entries note occupation and are linked with mills in Irby or Greasby townships:

- 1706 'James Morecroft Miller and Elizabeth Price Widd(ow) both of **Erby** married ye 14th of May'  
1709 'Elizabeth daughter of James Morecroft of **Irby-mill-Hill** Miller bap(tised) Novemb 1'  
1725 'William Harrison Miller of **Irby mill hill** in the township of **Greasby** and Parish of Thurstaston buried May 13'

Both millers are referred to as of 'Irby Mill Hill' but a significant change may be seen in the fact that in 1725 the miller is 'of Greasby', which suggests that the move to the new site took place between this date and 1709. The earlier site is not marked on any maps nor has its position been identified in field work. It cannot be certain whether any remains survived when the site was described by Abraham (1905, 144) or whether its former position was simply preserved in local memory. The site must, however, have been very close to the edge of Irby Mill Hill quarry. This was certainly in operation in 1767, when Woodchurch Churchwardens' Accounts record '77 loads of stone from Irby Hill' (Hewitt 1925, 9), and probably earlier. It is possible that the mill site was moved to the north because of its proximity to the quarry workings on the hill top.

### The post medieval site

Irby Mill is not mentioned in the text which accompanies Fearon and Eyes coastal chart of 1738, although other mills in the vicinity are included and the position of the mill itself is shown approximately on the 1755 edition of the chart. A possible explanation is that by this time the mill had been moved to its new site and no longer constituted a useful landmark, appearing against the hill instead of on the skyline as before. The site was less favourable for the prevailing winds for this reason, as Abraham (1905, 144) and Marriott (*Sheaf* 5 ser Jan 1977 (42)) have remarked.

By 1777 the mill was certainly in its later position as it is marked clearly in the north west corner of the cross roads on Burdett's map of Cheshire. A further piece of evidence regarding the date of the new mill was recovered from the ruin of the mill itself. Abraham (1905, 144) records 'Among the confused heap of ruins on the later site are several pieces of timber, one between two and three feet square, formerly the shaft, bears the date 1773 and the initials R<sup>M</sup>H'. This date provides a *terminus ante quem* but is not likely to be that of the building of the structure.

For the 19th century the site is documented in detail both on maps and in written records. Bryant's

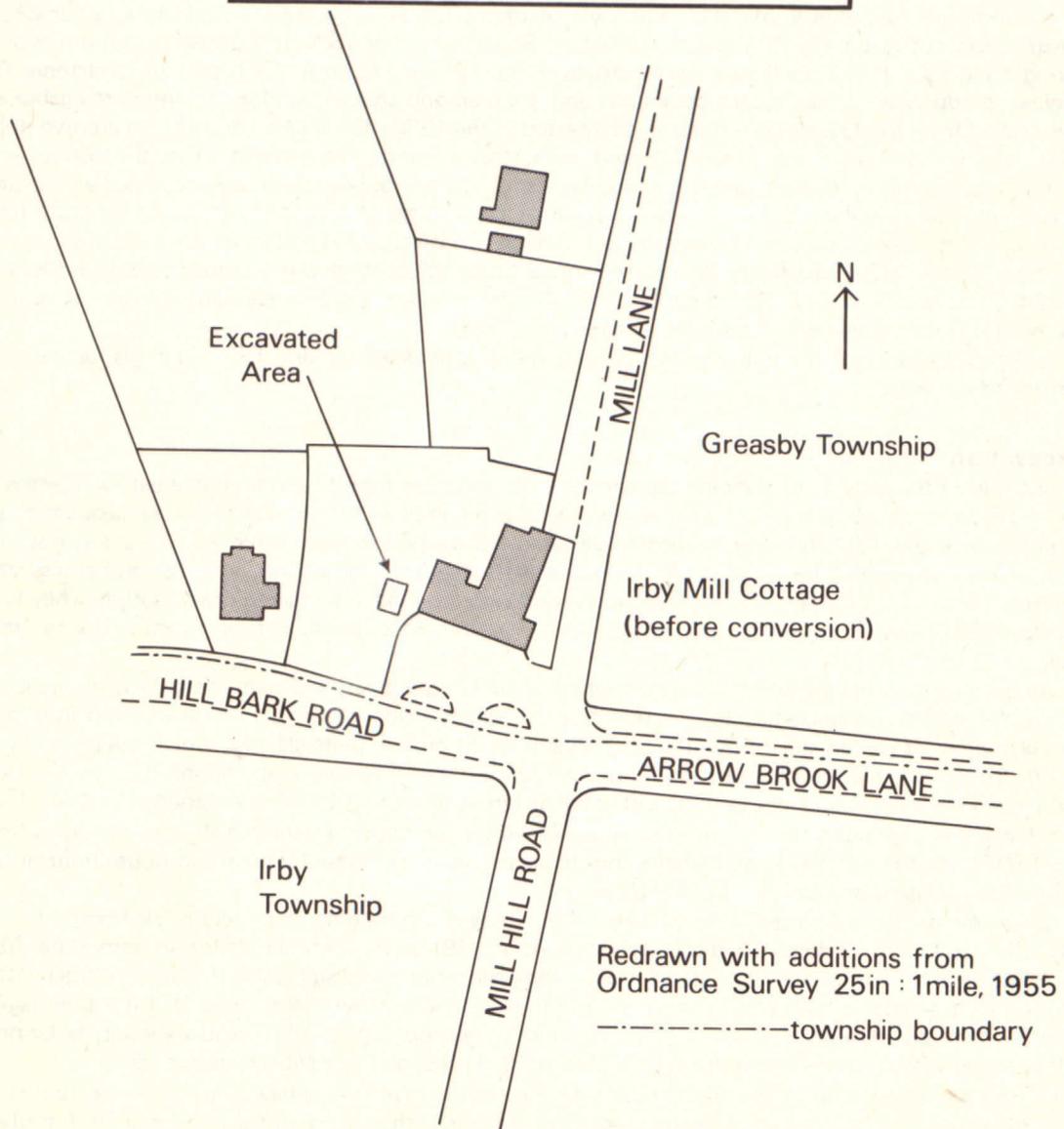
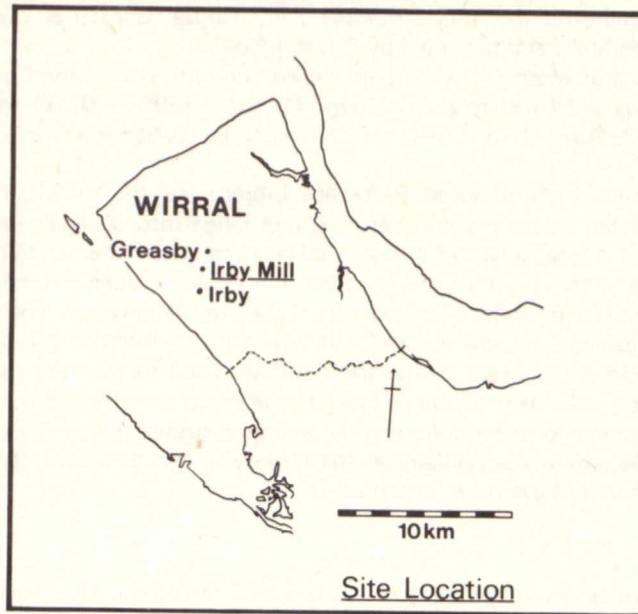


Figure 1: The Site of Irby Mill

map of 1829 shows the mill in its later position, and the tithe maps for Thurstaston, 1847 (ChRO ref EDT 394/2), and Greasby, 1849 (ChRO EDT 171/2) give considerable detail (see figure 2). In the tithe apportionment for Thurstaston the mill is number 214, 'House, Garden & Windmill' and was in the possession of John Ralph Shaw and occupied by Edward Realey.

By 1898 Colonel Arthur Mesham, who then owned the mill, commented that it was 'in a ruinous condition and dangerous and I had to pull it down' (Mesham 1899, 109). In the sale catalogue of the Greasby Hall Estate of 29 April 1913 (ChRO ref DRO/8/2/1), it is described as 'lot 18 . . . the site of the Old Wooden Windmill'.

An undated photograph in Birkenhead Reference Library (ref BC VII 42, 171/2), taken by James White and Theodore Green, shows the mill before it had fallen into disrepair (see figure 3a). The other view shown here is from a local postcard and was taken some years later when it was dilapidated. Both show a wooden post mill with a brick roundhouse, built in English garden 3 bond, on a sandstone plinth. There is a door into this, facing south east, away from the prevailing winds. The upper storey is weather boarded with an ogee gabled roof and was reached through a doorway at the rear. Wooden steps gave access to this. The wooden tail beam below the door was used to turn the superstructure around its central pivot, turning the sails into the wind. The latter are of simple framed form and would have been rigged with canvas. An undated water colour of the mill with similar detail by Peter Ghent, and a Hopps watercolour, dated 1898, are in the Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead. Regrettably no descriptions or photographs of the interior have been identified.

### **Irby Mill Cottage**

The earliest written reference to the mill cottage as distinct from the mill is in the tithe apportionment for Thurstaston (see above) of 1847. The style of the cottage would possibly indicate a rather earlier construction but as the building is not marked on Bryant's map of 1829, it is probable that it was built during the 1830s. It is a small two storey structure built of well faced ashlar blocks of sandstone. The original windows are small square casements and the diamond shaped windows in the north gable are understood from local residents to have been inserted in the 1930s. On the east front there are two doorways, one on the north side being blocked with stone. During the renovation of the cottage, the architect noted other, internal, features which suggested that the building had been occupied at one time as two separate dwellings; approximately a third of the cottage at the north end being separate from the rest. At the rear, a series of brick lean-to buildings had been added and an annexe on the south side was built in the 1920s (see figure 2). As mentioned above the cottage was occupied by Edward Realey in 1847, and the Census of 1851 describes him as 'Master Miller and Journeyman'. Before the cottage was built it is not certain where the miller would have lived.

A detailed history of the mill site and cottage will be published by Mr J T O'Neil in his forthcoming *History of Greasby*.

### **Excavation**

A study of the early maps showing the windmill site indicates that it had lain immediately adjacent to the south west corner of the mill cottage, an area which had been the cottage garden subsequent to the demolition of the mill. This area formed an elevated flat topped mound, some 2 to 3 metres above the level of the surrounding land. Steps had been constructed in the side of the mound to give access from the north side of the cottage and these were revealed when the site was cleared of vegetation. They were constructed of reused sandstone and brick of 18th century date, possibly taken from the demolished mill.

An area of 8 metres by 6 metres was stripped of turf in the position shown in figure 1. Immediately below the turf an unmortared stone foundation of reused stone blocks (1) was uncovered in a loose rubbly matrix of garden soil containing large quantities of broken plate glass (2) which can probably be accounted for by the greenhouse shown on the 1938 Ordnance Survey map (figure 2). A shallow slot (7/8) cut into the lower levels, and on a slightly different alignment to the stone foundation, was filled with loose soil containing recent material. Together with a number of articulated chicken skeletons (in 2 and 16/17), on the north side of the site, the slot is probably associated with a hen house built at the rear of the cottage in the earlier part of the century.

Below the garden soil, a sequence of layers was removed, containing stone and brick fragments and gradually becoming sandier. All these layers (3, 4, 13, 19) were contaminated with some late 19th century pottery although they contained a very high proportion of earlier residual material, largely 18th century in date with a few earlier sherds of brown glazed earthenware (see Table 1). Into these layers were cut two animal burials (16/17 and 14/15, chicken and dog, see Table 2) and several irregular post holes packed with brick and stone fragments (5/6, 9/10, 11/12) and of relatively recent date.

On the north east side of the area a relatively pure sandy layer (4) appeared to have been tipped on the site in the late 19th century and large quantities of early 18th century pottery and a small flint blade were found in this. A discontinuous layer of compacted red and grey clay (18 and 20) sealed the only level which was found to contain purely early 18th century material (21). This lay immediately over the sandstone bedrock, which rose steeply towards the south end of the site, and showed no traces of the mill foundations.

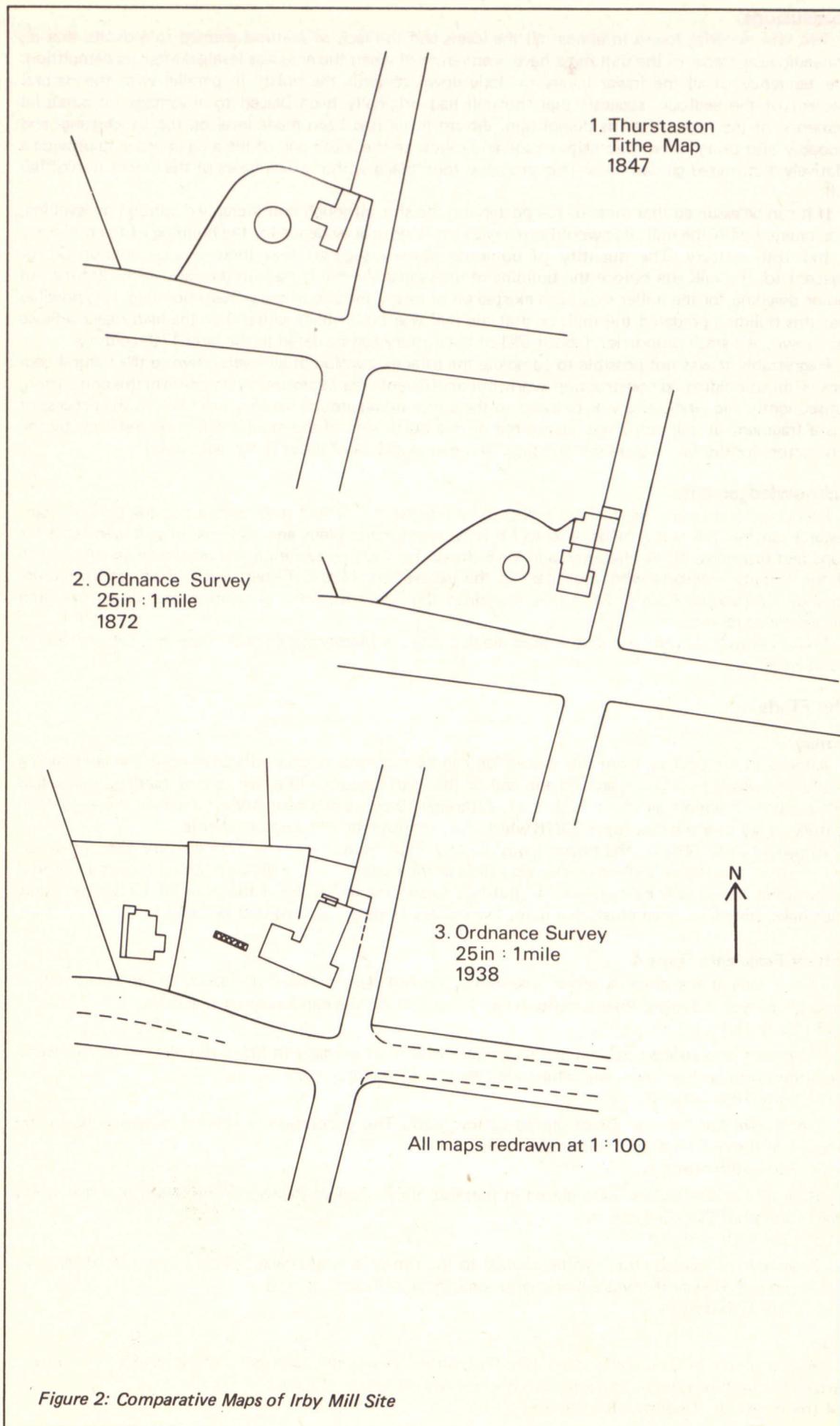


Figure 2: Comparative Maps of Irby Mill Site

## Conclusions

The late material found in almost all the levels and the lack of features seemed to indicate that all archaeological traces of the mill must have been removed when the area was levelled after its demolition. The tendency of all the lower layers to slope down towards the north, in parallel with the natural gradient of the bedrock, suggests that the mill had originally been placed to advantage on a natural eminence of the rock. After its demolition, the small hill had been made level on top by shifting, and probably also bringing in, quantities of soil and rubble to the south end of the area in order to provide a relatively flat, raised garden area. This probably took place within a few years of the demolition of the mill.

If it can be assumed that most of the pottery on the site, although considerably disturbed by levelling, is associated with the mill, this would agree with the historical evidence for the building of the mill early in the 18th century. The quantity of domestic pottery suggests that there was occupation on, or adjacent to, the mill site before the building of the sandstone mill cottage in the early 19th century. An earlier dwelling for the miller may have existed on or nearby the site of the present building. It is possible that this building predated the mill, or that the mill was built rather earlier than the historical evidence has shown, as a small proportion (about 5%) of the pottery can be dated to the later 17th century.

Regrettably it was not possible to complete the total excavation of all levels down to the natural bedrock without holding up construction work, but a sufficient area was examined to confirm this conclusion. Subsequently the whole site was reduced to the surrounding ground level by machine. In the process of this a fragment of mill stone was uncovered on the north side of the mound which was retained by the contractors for display outside the building. No other evidence of the mill was uncovered.

## Acknowledgements

Particular thanks are due to Miss S Nicholson and Mr J T O'Neil who carried out the documentary research on the mill and cottage; also to Mr M Brown for the plans and sections; Miss K Lancaster for maps and drawings; Mr W Hardman and Mr F Brown for their cooperation and assistance on site; and to all the Society members who took part in the excavation. Miss C Fisher, Department of Vertebrate Zoology, Merseyside County Museums, examined the bones from the excavation and kindly prepared the appended report.

The excavation records and all the finds are deposited in Merseyside County Museums, Department of Antiquities.

## The Finds

### Pottery

Almost all the pottery from the excavation can be regarded as unstratified owing to the landscaping of the site which took place around the end of the 19th century and which caused the disturbance and redeposition of almost all levels except 21. Although 19 contained no material later than the early 18th century, it lay over the clay layer 20/18 which did produce late 19th century sherds.

Approximately 65% of the pottery was of early 18th century or later 17th century date, however, and most of this has very close or exact parallels in the material from the South Castle Street, Liverpool excavations, which will be published in full in a forthcoming volume of this Journal. Only a very few finds have, therefore, been illustrated here. The pottery finds are summarised in Table 1.

### Pottery Fragments, figure 4

1. Four joining sherds of a brown stoneware handled cup in fine buff fabric. Ornamented with a band of grooves and raised lines around the girth, over which the handle has been applied.  
3.13 Early 18th century.
2. Fragment of a straight sided, handled tankard with splashed glaze in fine buff coloured earthenware. Decorated with girth grooves over which the handle has been applied.  
3.13 Early 18th century.
3. Decorative lug from a splash glazed hollow ware. The decoration is applied in two coils to the exterior of the rim. Fine buff coloured earthenware.  
3.13 Early 18th century.
4. Base of a coarse hollow ware glazed in purplish black. Red earthenware fabric with rounded white quartz and small black inclusions.  
3.18 Late 17th century.
5. Fragment of faceted strap handle applied to the rim of a large coarse hollow ware, with black glaze inside and out. Red earthenware fabric with some large inclusions of grog.  
3.19 Late 17th century.

### Flint

6. Broken blade of semi translucent grey flint, struck as a single flake and slightly convex. The convex surface has been worked by the removal of secondary longitudinal flakes.  
3.4 (redeposited) Neolithic/Bronze Age.

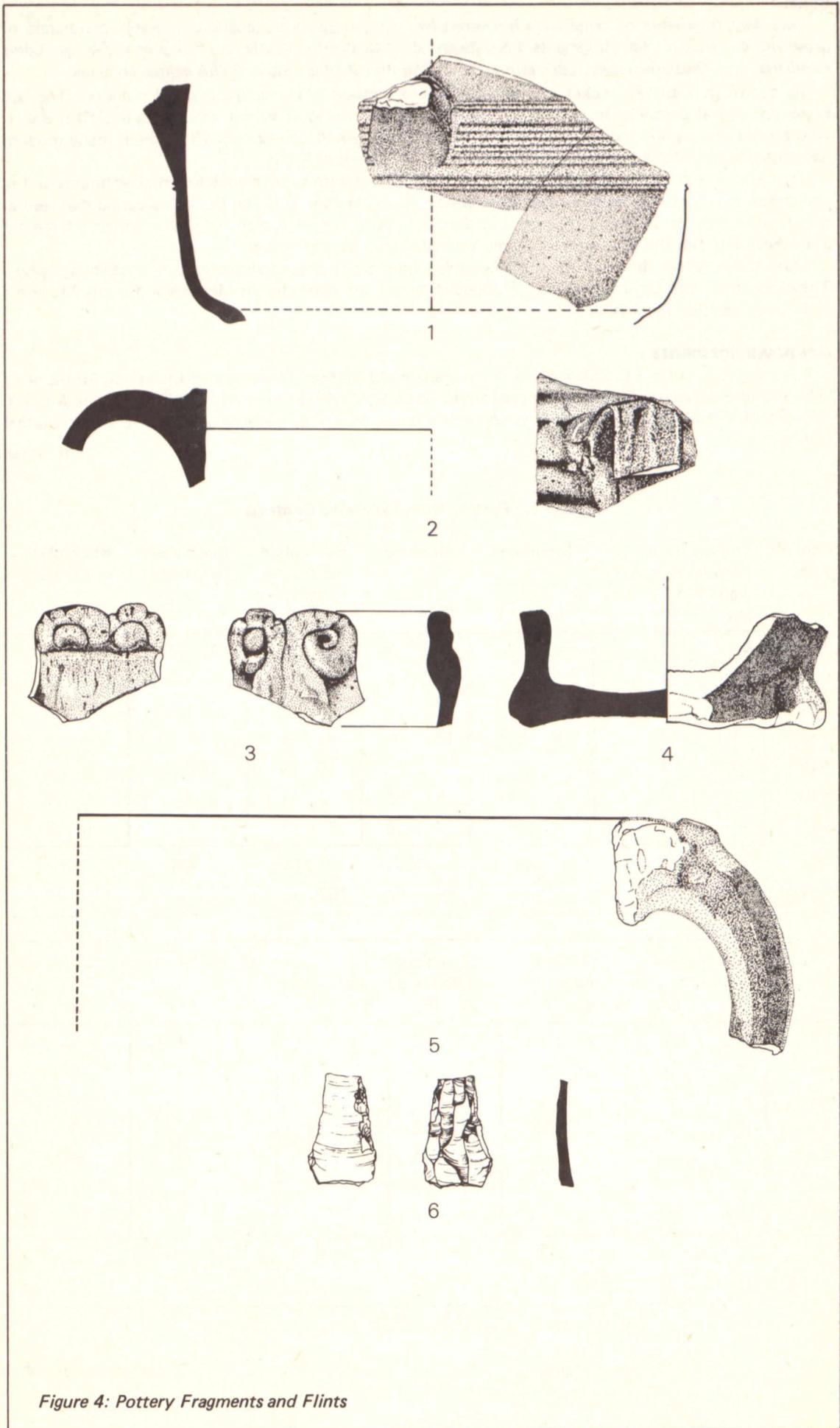


Figure 4: Pottery Fragments and Flints

## Bones

Over 400 fragments of bone were recovered from the excavation, generally in a very good state of preservation. About 380 fragments have been identified and include the following species: *Canis familiaris*, dog; *Ovis aries*, sheep; *Bos taurus*, cow; *Equus caballus*, horse; *Gallus gallus*, chicken.

As shown in Table 2, chicken and dog bones were present in by far the greatest numbers. The dog bones are almost certainly from one skeleton and are from an adult animal. According to Dr J R Baker, who carried out a pathological study of the bones, these would correspond with a great many modern day mongrels and closely resemble the bones of various breeds of Collie.

The great number of chicken bones present is consistent with the evidence for chicken houses on the site. There is a considerable size range in evidence, from Bantam to Game Cock, indicating that several breeds were kept. From the pathological evidence it would seem that many of the bones came from old individuals and that the birds were probably kept primarily for egg laying.

Measurements have been taken where possible under the von den Driesch system (see Bibliography). These, together with Dr J R Baker's pathological report, are deposited in Merseyside County Museums with the excavation records.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr J R Baker of the Veterinary Field Station, University of Liverpool, for his most helpful pathological report and additional advice on identification. I would also like to thank Mr G Y McInnes of the Museums Conservation Department for obtaining some of the necessary comparative material.

Clem Fisher

**Table 1: Pottery from Excavated Contexts**

Context Nos.	English china, porcelain, enamel wares etc.		Stoneware		Slipware		Black glaze-red/purple body		Black glaze buff body		Black glaze-mixed body	
	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV
3-3	42	12	6	3	9	2	11	2	4	2	19	3
3-4	11	4	3	2	15	4	37	5	5	2	21	2
3-8	—	—	—	—	1	1	4	1	—	—	2	1
3-13	4	2	6	2	15	6	21	3	12	5	59	5
3-18	4	3	—	—	1	1	5	1	1	1	—	—
3-19	—	—	1	1	1	1	2	1	—	—	5	1
3-21	—	—	—	—	4	2	22	2	—	—	5	3
%	12%		3%		9%		21%		4%		23%	
TOTALS	61	21	16	8	46	17	102	15	22	10	111	15

Context Nos.	Brown glaze-purple body		Splashed glaze		Lead glaze yellow ware		Tin glaze ware		Gravel Tempered		Clay pipes	
	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV	No	MV
3-3	5	2	6	1	4	2	—	—	1	1	6	2
3-4	4	1	22	2	5	1	1	1	1	1	—	—
3-8	—	—	—	—	2	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
3-13	5	1	33	9	8	2	1	1	—	—	3	2
3-18	1	1	1	1	1	1	—	—	—	—	3	3
3-19	—	—	1	1	1	1	—	—	—	—	6	3
3-21	1	1	5	3	—	—	—	—	1	1	5	3
%	3%		14%		4%		0.5%		0.5%		5%	
TOTALS	16	6	68	17	21	9	2	2	3	3	23	13

NB Context 2, topsoil, is omitted here as very disturbed

No = Number of sherds  
MV = Minimum number of vessels

Total No Sherds = 491

**Table 2: Excavated Bone**

Context	Canis familiaris	Ovaries	Bos taurus	?Equus caballus	Gallus gallus	Total of identifiable fragments
2	6	3	—	?2	200	205
3	6	—	—	—	5	11
4	—	—	1	—	—	1
8	—	—	—	—	2	2
13	unidentifiable fragment					
15	64	—	—	—	—	64
17	—	—	—	—	101	101
TOTAL	70	3	1	?2	308	384
% of total	18	1	.5	.5	80	100

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**Abbreviations**

- BM Harl Ms      British Museum Harleian Manuscripts
- Chet Soc*      Chetham Society
- ChRO      Cheshire Record Office, The Castle, Chester
- Hist Mss Comm      Historical Manuscripts Commission
- Sheaf*      *Cheshire Sheaf*, Irvine, W F & Bennett, H E, eds.
- Trans Hist Soc Lancashire Cheshire*      Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire