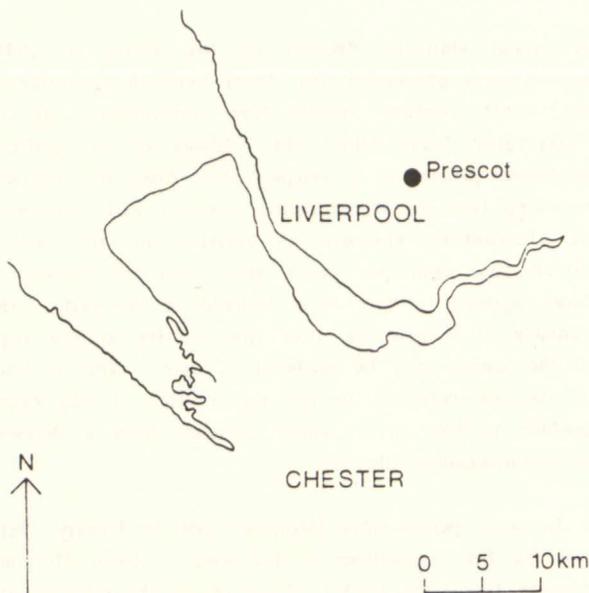


P.J. Davey

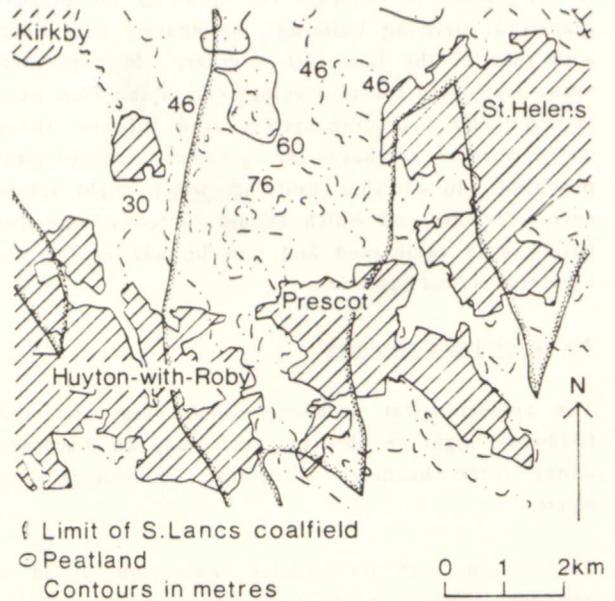
Introduction

The town of Prescott lies on a coal-measure sandstone ridge at some 80m above sea-level, roughly half-way between Liverpool and Warrington (Fig. 1.1). The sandstones have been subject to complex faulting which results in the frequent exposure of coal seams at the surface. As the ridge dips away steeply south towards the Mersey Basin, and more gently to the north, the solid geology is obscured by glacial till. The extensive peat deposits of Eccleston and Knowsley Mosses provide the northern boundary of the town and clearly have limited urban development in that direction, whilst the poorly drained clays to the south have also been unattractive for settlement (Fig. 1.2).

The place-name is first met as *Prestecota* in 1178. This seems to mean the manor or cottage of the priest or rectory (Ekwall 1922, 108; Potter 1959, 12) A further name - *Churchley* - occurs in 13th century personal names. In 1286 a Richard de Churchley granted his lands to his son *in villa de Churchley de deo et de Sancta Maria ecclesie de Prestecota* (Bailey 1937, 312), thus linking the two names. Churchley survives name on the 19th century Tithe Map on the east side of the township (Davey 1978a, 64-5).



1.1 Prescott location plan



1.2 Prescott geology

A market was in existence before 1322 and Charters survive from 1333 and 1458 (Bailey 1937, 309). Although the 1333 Charter described Prescott simply as a manor, 16th century records often use the term *burgagium*, so it is likely that burgage tenure was adopted at some time after 1333. There is no independent evidence that the town ever received Borough status. In 1445 Henry VI granted the patronage of Prescott rectory as an endowment to his newly founded College of Our Lady and St Nicholas (known as King's College) in Cambridge (Bailey 1937, 1-2). The College kept good records so that the town is well documented from the 16th century onwards. Originally in Lancashire, Local Government reorganisation in 1974 placed Prescott on the eastern edge of the Knowsley Metropolitan District of Merseyside. A much fuller discussion of the documentary evidence has recently been published in *Historic Towns of the Merseyside Area: a survey of urban settlement to c. 1800* (Philpott 1988).

The Town Centre Plan Report

In 1978 the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside carried out an assessment of the archaeological potential of the town as part of the background documentation for the Town Centre Plan being prepared by the Knowsley Borough Planning Officer (Davey 1978a). This showed that Prescott is one of the oldest and best documented settlements in Merseyside. Using Bailey's reconstruction of the plan of the town

from the 1592 survey carried out by King's College, it was possible to compare the detail of the present plan and surviving buildings, boundaries and plots, with that of the late 16th century. In particular, areas designated for re-development in the Plan were assessed and a grading system used to show those which seemed to have the greatest archaeological potential. In addition, buildings which might retain early elements and which should be considered for listing were catalogued and new boundaries for the Conservation Area suggested.

The archaeological objectives

The archaeological problems which excavation and fieldwork might be able to tackle may be discussed under three headings - origins, chronology and nature.

The church, with its circular churchyard, is in a dominant position in the town and is primary to its structure. This, together with the ecclesiastical place-name elements, the small size of the township compared with its neighbours, its Holy Well and proximity to Eccleston - a contiguous township whose name may refer to the church in Prescott - suggests that modern Prescott may have originated as a pre-Norman religious centre which later took on Sunday market functions. Neither the documentary evidence nor the shape of the town plan suggest any significant amount of planning during the medieval period. A primary objective of archaeological activity would, therefore, be to establish the locus of the town's origin and to trace its subsequent development. Secondly and linked to this, it would be important to try to date those elements which could be identified and to try to establish at what period the settlement became truly urban. Thirdly, archaeological evidence should provide some idea of what kinds of activities were going on in the town. Although the 16th century documents give the impression of a very small settlement, of possibly fewer than 500 people, whose economy was largely agriculturally based, there is a hint that the natural resources of coal and clay were beginning to be exploited and that a number of minor industrial activities were being practised. It is not clear whether this picture shows Prescott at the beginning of post-medieval expansion or whether it represents the nadir of a late medieval economic decline.

Answers to all three questions would be of significance not just for Prescott but in the study of early Christian origins and town development throughout the north-west of England, where very little archaeological work has been carried out in the large tract of country between Chester and Carlisle.

Since 1978, with these kinds of objectives in view, there has been considerable archaeological activity in the town. This volume of the *Journal of the Merseyside Archaeological Society* contains reports on the majority of this work which is presented in roughly the order of its execution. Figure 1.3 shows all the sites and should be referred back to when the individual reports are read. Sites A to F are those of full-scale excavations, whilst Sites 1 to 30 cover observations of contractors' work (dots), small excavations (diamonds) and sampling excavations (squares). The position of the peat sample (Site 31) is shown as a small triangle. The individual contributors have allowed the writer to conflate and summarise their introductory sections in order to avoid repetition of the description of Prescott's topography and documentary history. For the same reason a summary of the documentary and archaeological evidence for the pottery industry in Prescott, an evaluation of the contribution made by archaeology to the understanding of the town and a comprehensive bibliography are presented at the end of the volume. Material which is integral to the understanding of the individual sites is retained in the separate reports.

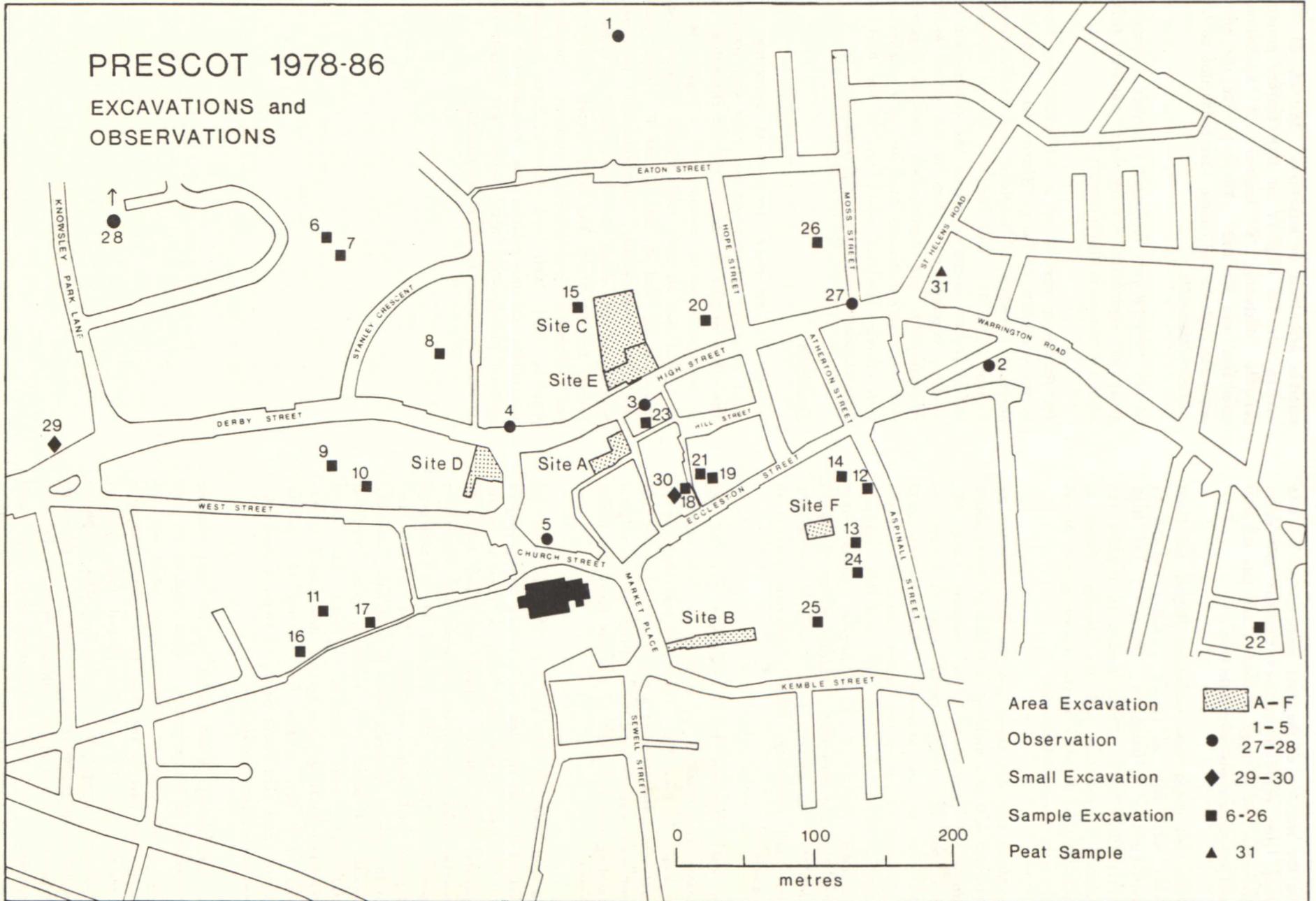
Archaeological Fieldwork 1978-1986 - a Summary

During the 1978 survey it was possible to spend a short time examining the foundation trenches for an extension to the town football stand (Site 1). These revealed traces of 19th century pottery kilns - part of the Moss Pottery pre-dating the layout shown on the 1848 50" Ordnance Survey map.

A casual visit to Prescott by the writer in 1979 recovered a preserved peat layer beneath demolished eighteenth century stables and outbuildings at 1, Warrington Road (Site 31). Study of the pollen sequences present in a sample taken from this deposit revealed five forest clearance zonules, with evidence of fluctuating agricultural activity in the area. Given that this particular site, part of Eccleston Moss, appears to have been enclosed in the early 16th century, it is possible that the zonules at the top of the sample may be medieval in date. This is one of the few occasions in the region when it has been possible to look at a pollen sequence from a deposit so close to a major settlement.

A five-week period from December 1980 to January 1981 saw the first excavations in the town. Robin Holgate dug on five sites (A-E), three in the back-lands of putative medieval burgage plots and two on frontages. 18th and 19th century cellarage had destroyed the frontages, but to the rear garden soils containing medieval and post-medieval finds were recovered. These did not appear to represent intense occupation in the earlier periods. A bonus of these excavations

PRESCOT 1978-86
EXCAVATIONS and
OBSERVATIONS



- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| Area Excavation |  A-F |
| Observation |  1-5
27-28 |
| Small Excavation |  29-30 |
| Sample Excavation |  6-26 |
| Peat Sample |  31 |

1.3 Prescott site location plan

was the recovery of the first medieval pottery kiln group from anywhere between Cheshire and north Lancashire and a range of wasters and kiln material from post-medieval production in the town.

Before and during these excavations Holgate and David Freke were able to record evidence exposed by contractors in Eccleston St., Church St. and High Street (Sites 2-5). These tended to confirm the problem of cellarage and the damage caused to archaeological deposits by the intense growth of the town in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In March 1982 Ron Cowell and Gill Chitty recorded the refurbishment of a building in Eccleston Street which proved of interest in three respects (Site 30). First, part of a timber-framed structure survived to the rear of the property. Dendrochronological assessment of one of the timbers showed that the building must post-date the mid-16th century. Secondly, associated archaeological layers were identified and excavated. Thirdly, a fine group of probable 17th century pottery was recovered, the first such assemblage from a domestic context in Merseyside.

In 1981 Maureen Hollis examined part of the construction trenches for a group of 1830s cottages in Derby St, (Site 29). These had been deepened by contractors and revealed a group of earthenware and stoneware wasters used as hard-core in the original building and presumed to emanate from the Brook Pottery.

Between November 1983 and June 1984 the writer and Robert Philpott sampled the surviving stratigraphy in 20 locations in the town using a 1-metre square quadrat (Sites 6-26; cf. Philpott and Davey 1984). In general these excavations confirmed the impression gained by Holgate that survival of archaeological deposits on frontages was poor. The fact that most of the sample quadrats were in back-lands, however, meant that more sites retaining some medieval stratigraphy were located. These, like those described by Holgate, suggested that human activity was at a very modest level during this period. Again, these excavations produced ample evidence for post-medieval pottery production.

In 1985 Robina McNeil carried out the most extensive excavations so far undertaken. These were in an open area to the south of Eccleston Street which was due to become part of the new Town Centre Shopping Precinct (Site F). It was hoped that signs of medieval "burgage" divisions and back-land occupation would be forthcoming in the area of c. 180 sq.m. explored. Once again, although much of the site appears to have been undisturbed until very recent times, no significant medieval finds were made,

whether artifactual or structural. Instead, on the eastern side, the edge of an 18th century pottery complex, including a number of specialised structures, was revealed. These provide the most important evidence for coarse ware production so far available in Merseyside.

In July 1986 Philpott recovered a further interesting group of eighteenth century kiln material from contractors' trenches in High St (Site 27).

The final group reported on in this volume was found by the occupants of Twist's House, just outside the northern boundary of medieval and post-medieval Prescott (Site 28). This consisted of two suitcases full of pottery excavated during the construction of a vehicle inspection pit. Much of this proved to be reconstructable and documentary research suggests that this material derived from one of a number of 18th century potteries which lay on the Earl of Derby's Estate just inside the boundary of Knowsley.

The Results

Despite all this work, progress in answering the three questions posed above has been very limited. The urban origins of Prescott and the chronology of its development remain obscure. In a negative sense, it is clear that an early focus almost certainly does not lie in the area of Sites C and F. There must still be considerable archaeological potential, however, in and around the western parts of Eccleston Street, Kemble Street and High Street. Similarly, the enigmatic ecclesiastical complex, including Church, Holy Well and Priest's Cote remains unexplored. On the positive side, evidence for post-medieval Prescott, which both confirms and extends the documentary evidence, has steadily accumulated.