

14. Prescott and its Archaeology

R.A. Philpott

The development of Prescott as a town, as distinct from an ecclesiastical centre with its associated manor, appears to have taken place in the 13-14th century with the nationwide rise in population and development of the market economy. In south west Lancashire, as elsewhere, this resulted in the granting of market charters to a number of settlements, many of which subsequently were granted borough status by local landowners. At Prescott the growth of the market function of the settlement was stimulated by the parishioners attending church from the surrounding townships taking the opportunity to engage in unofficial exchange or sale of surplus produce. The rector and lord of the manor, Ralph Dacre, attempted to profit from this by obtaining a charter for a market in 1322 but was thwarted by the bishop's reluctance to sanction trading on a Sunday. In 1333 however the rector was successful in securing a charter for a Monday market. The growth of a parish centre into a market town and borough is paralleled nearby at Ormskirk.

Although no borough charter survives for Prescott, the use of the term *burgagium* (burgage) in the 16th century for the larger portion of subdivided plots which were then held by copyhold tenure provides compelling evidence that earlier in the medieval period the town became a borough. Prescott, in common with other south Lancashire medieval boroughs, did not however survive the 15th century with its privileged burghal status intact. Manchester similarly lost its borough status by the 16th century and there, too, copyhold plots retained the name, if not the privileges, of the burgage (Morris 1983, 40). The granting of borough status may have been accompanied by some reorganisation of the settlement into regular plots, some along a newly created street known in the 16th century as Newgate Street (now Eccleston Street) (Philpott forthcoming).

In other respects the plan of the town testifies to its ecclesiastical origins. The proximity of the church and market place, which grew up around the churchyard wall, reflected the close connection between attendance at church and trading. The settlement stands at the junction of a through route, probably of early origin, east from Liverpool which divides south east to the river crossing at Warrington and north east to Wigan. The plan is that sometimes described as a suspended form, developing to one side of the main route way which itself served the early ecclesiastical settlement. Topography and the pattern of land-holding defined and delimited the town itself. To the north, skirting the southern edge of an area of peat bog known as Heally or

Hackley Moss, lay the boundary with the townships of Knowsley and Eccleston. To the south and west of the church lay the demesne/glebe estate of the lords of the manor who were also rectors of Prescott church. The Hall estate remained distinct from the town until the mid 19th century. This western part of the township was known as 'Prescot' in the 12th century to distinguish it from Churchley which was applied to the eastern portion. Although the name is probably of Anglo-Saxon origin, Churchley is first recorded in 1286 when it is described as a "villa" and seems to have included the nucleated settlement as distinct from the ecclesiastical section of the township. The settlement possessed open fields, at least one of which was still called Churchley Field in the 19th century. By the later 14th century the name Churchley was in decline and with the growth of the town, the name Prescott was applied to the whole township (Bailey 1937, 313).

The Town of Prescott: the Evidence of Archaeology

Despite the intensity of archaeological activity in the town since 1978, evidence for its origin or early development has not so far been forthcoming. The probable early ecclesiastical focus lies in relatively undisturbed ground to the south and west of the church and has not been examined archaeologically.

However, some evidence has been recovered of later medieval activity. Both area and sample excavations have been conducted in parts of the town known to have been occupied at the 1592 survey and which probably formed the principal focus of the medieval market town and borough. Here a fairly consistent pattern was observed. Street frontage sites had been largely disturbed by extensive levelling, cellaring and rebuilding which had removed all traces of earlier structures or other archaeological features. The problem was most acute between High Street and Eccleston Street where the difficulty of building on the steep slope had necessitated terracing against the hillside.

By contrast, examination of areas lying either to the rear of street frontages or a little away from the presumed medieval heart of the town revealed less disturbance of archaeological deposits. Three area excavations and six sample holes encountered early soil horizons which contained only medieval and early post-medieval pottery. The 1592 Survey confirms that these areas were occupied by gardens or crofts and very few features associated with these deposits were located. The only 16th century or earlier features consisted of a gully, perhaps for drainage, with 16th century pottery in the fill (P84/24), a spread of charcoal within a deep clay soil layer behind no. 29 High Street (P84/20) and a row of post-holes,

probably of late medieval date, dividing two burgages behind 19 Market Street (Site B).

For the early post-medieval period, however, excavation and structural survivals begin to complement the picture of Prescott revealed in the excellent documentary record. Not only do several 17th century or earlier buildings survive in the town (rear of no. 33, nos. 21-23 and no. 30 Eccleston Street; no. 21 High Street), but also numerous sections of boundary walls, some of early date, others on earlier lines, preserve much of the structure of the late medieval town (Davey 1978, 19-26).

Intact stratigraphy of this period had survived to the rear of one of these early buildings, nos. 21-23 Eccleston Street (Site 30). Salvage excavation located the foundation trench of the back wall of the timber framed building and a significant group of pottery, probably of 17th century date, was recovered. The felling date of c. 1543 for a structural timber may provide a date for the initial construction of the building but is more likely to indicate reuse of the timber.

For the 18th century onwards, archaeological evidence becomes abundant, in particular for one of Prescott's major industries, pottery production. Fragments of saggar, kiln stilts and wasted pottery have turned up in most formal area and sample excavations and continue to appear in many service trench spoil heaps in the town. The secondary use of pottery waste as hardcore in building foundation trenches, road construction and bedding material for yard surfaces indicates that caution is needed both in the attribution of dumps or wasters to individual potteries and in the use of distribution of waste to locate pottery sites. However, a previously unsuspected pottery manufacturing site was encountered in excavations in Eccleston Street. Abundant pottery waste in sample hole (P84/14) was followed in 1985 by the discovery of structures associated with manufacture in the adjacent plot (Site F). Dating to the late 18th century, the site provides excellent evidence of the range of wares and forms in production in Prescott in a century when at least six potteries are documented.

The first decade of archaeological work in Prescott has raised a number of questions. In particular medieval occupation in the town, although firmly documented, has remained elusive. The degree of later disturbance revealed in archaeological work suggests that surviving medieval structural remains are likely to be limited in extent. However, the potential for survival of rock-cut features has recently been demonstrated with the discovery of a probable late 16th stone wall foundation in road

widening in Kemble Street during October 1987 (Philpott in preparation). In areas of the town which lie on gently sloping or level ground a combination of relatively shallow later building foundations and considerable accumulation of soil may preserve buried features, especially if they cut the underlying sandstone.

Although the potential for survival of archaeological features is greater towards the rear of burgage plots, the work carried out to date suggests that little early activity should be expected in these locations. Robina McNeil's excavation to the rear of Eccleston Street (Site F) was in part intended to recover evidence for the function of burgage plots. However, in the rear of the plot, no medieval features were encountered. Similar garden or cultivated soil layers, containing late medieval pottery, were encountered in three of Robin Holgate's excavations, behind 19 Market Street, 11 High Street, and 7-9 Derby Street (Sites B, C and D). In other towns in Cheshire and Lancashire excavation within burgage plots has produced a similar pattern. No early features were recovered in Robina McNeil's excavation of part of a burgage in Frodsham in 1984. In excavation of part of a burgage in Wigan the only substantial medieval feature recovered was a well, and after this had fallen into disuse, from the late medieval period through to the 17th century the entire site was covered with a layer of garden or plough soil (Jones and Price 1985, 29). In all cases finds are confined to dispersed, often abraded, sherds of pottery, consistent with the casual disposal of rubbish on open ground.

The conclusion is inescapable that the burgages were largely given over to agricultural activities in the medieval and early post-medieval periods. The 1592 Survey indicates that many plots were occupied by gardens or orchards, while the Court Leet for the 16th century provides evidence that some townspeople kept livestock. These have left no archaeological trace other than blanket layers of cultivated soil and several kilns are documented, some clearly for pottery, others for malting or baking. Small scale industrial processes such as pottery production, weaving, tanning, smithing or leather working, recorded for the 16th century, will have taken place in the burgages during the medieval period, in some cases in workshops attached to dwellings, but so far archaeological evidence for these has not come to light. Even during the population expansion of the post-medieval period, apart perhaps from barns or byres, the rear of some plots do not appear to have been developed and remained in agricultural or horticultural use. The absence of rubbish pits, which are common on densely occupied urban sites, may merely reflect the relatively small area of the town that has been examined archaeologically. However, by

the 16th century rubbish disposal appears to have been effected through the dispersal of surface middens, which provoked frequent disputes heard in the Prescott Court Leet, and resulted in dispersed scatters of worn pottery.

Although technically urban in the sense of possessing not only a market grant but also, for a time in the late medieval period, borough status, the archaeological evidence suggests that the level of urbanism in a small market town like Prescott was low. Complex and deeply stratified urban deposits, reflecting centuries of intensive use and dense occupation of burgages, should not be anticipated in the relatively late market towns of south west Lancashire. Prescott was one of a network of small market towns serving the fertile arable land of south west Lancashire. It supplied the needs of the agricultural hinterland as a source of manufactured items, equipment and other services while providing a market for local produce. However, the town lacked the favourable combination of circumstances, such as wealthy patronage or hinterland, access to major trade routes by land or sea, or important administrative or ecclesiastical functions that might have elevated it to regional pre-eminence. The concentration of resident artisans and purveyors of services in the town together with the regular influx of local people from the surrounding rural townships to the market and church were typical of small towns which developed in response to the growth of the market economy in the 13th and 14th centuries. Although increasingly removed from cultivation of the town's fields during the post-medieval period, the townspeople still supplemented their income from trade by growing food and keeping livestock in their copyhold plots. In Prescott, therefore, the medieval 'urban' landscape seems to have remained largely rural in character.

The process of development of Prescott from a small, late medieval market town to an industrial manufacturing town was well under way by the 17th century. Illegal subdivision of former burgages as early as c. 1513 hints at a growing population, which had risen to over four hundred by the last decade of the century (Bailey 1937, 283, 300 n.). The occupations of the townspeople as recorded in the Court Leet and wills and inventories included a range of craftsmen, artisans, victuallers. Although little industry is recorded, only 43 (19%) from a total of 225 recorded occupations in wills and other records for the period 1560-1720 are described as yeomen or husbandmen in contrast to surrounding rural townships where around two-thirds of the population were concerned directly with agriculture (Cleaver 1982, 58). Coal mining and watchmaking are well documented for the 17th century and by the early 18th century several pottery factories had been established.

Richard Edge's map of Prescott in 1743 shows the main streets of the town with continuous built-up frontages, and although lateral expansion of the town was restricted by tenurial considerations and township boundaries, infilling of the former burgage plots, particularly between High Street and Eccleston Street, created the densely occupied town centre illustrated by the 1848 Ordnance Survey map.

APPENDIX

Lancashire potters recorded in the Much Wenlock area of Shropshire

D.A. Higgins

The following references were noted in the Much Wenlock Borough Archives which are held at the Old Corn Exchange in Much Wenlock. These potters had probably come to the area to seek work at the potteries which flourished in and around the Ironbridge Gorge. The first two were noted in the Examinations Book (Q1/3/1):

Page 89, 7 February 1734 (1735). The examination of Edward Williamson otherwise Davies, Labourer, records that he was born in Berhill (?) in Lancashire where he lived for about a year with his parents before moving to Rainford about twenty years previously (i.e. 1715). In Rainford he was hired for seven years by Joshua Lyon and then two years previously (c. 1733) he had married Elizabeth Ffairest of Rainford at Ligh [sic] in Lancashire. He had a daughter, Mary, then (i.e 1735) about three-quarters of a year old. He signed with a cross. I am grateful to Ron Dagnall of Rainford for the following notes on Joshua Lyon. He is recorded as a smallholder and potter in 1723 and 1727 and presumably employed Williamson to help with both activities. An apprenticeship dated 1 Jan 1727 records that he took Charles Swift, a poor child, for seven years, to instruct in the art of Husbandry and Common Labourer's work about a Mughhouse. So although Williamson is only described as a labourer he would presumably have been working as a potter for Lyon.

Page 131, 31 May 1737. The examination of Richard Atherton of Broseley, Potter records that he was born in Prescott [sic] in Lancashire but that his father was a certified person from the parish of Bould [sic] in Lancashire. The Lancashire Justices at their Quarter Session had therefore determined his legal place of settlement to be Bould. No other information is given in this entry but it may be worth trying to locate the Lancashire examination referred to. He signs with a good signature.

The final entry comes from the Bastardy Examination Book (After Birth), Q1/6/11. An entry dated 17 May 1830 records that Margaret Roden of Broseley gave birth to a child on 1 March 1830 the father of whom was William Prescott, potter, late of Sutton in Lancashire.

Bibliography

- Allan J.P. 1984 Medieval and Post-Medieval Finds from Exeter Exeter Archaeol Rep, Vol. 3.
- Amery A. and Davey P.J. 1979 "Post-Medieval Pottery from Brookhill, Buckley, Clwyd" Medieval and Later Pottery in Wales 2, 49-85.
- Baart J. et al. 1977 Opgravingen in Amsterdam: twintig jaar stadskernonderzoek. Amsterdam.
- Bailey F.A. 1935 "Coroners Inquests held in the Manor of Prescott 1746-1789" Trans Hist Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 86.
- Bailey F.A. 1937 "A selection from the Prescott Court Leet and other Records 1447-1600" Record Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 89.
- Bailey F.A. 1947 "Early Coalmining in Prescott, Lancashire" Trans Hist Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 99, 1947, 1-20.
- Baines E. 1870 The History of the County Palatine and Duchy of Lancaster (ed. J. Harland) Volume 11.
- Barker D. 1984 "18th and 19th Century Ceramics excavated at the Foley Pottery, Fenton, Stoke-on-Trent" Staffs Archaeol Studies 1, 1984, 63-86.
- Brears P.C.D. 1971 The English Country Pottery: its History and Techniques David and Charles, Newton Abbot.
- Brooks C.M. 1983 "Aspects of the sugar-refining industry from the 16th to the 19th century" Post-Medieval Archaeol 17, 1-14.
- Brown K., Davey, P.J. and Freke D.J. forthcoming Excavations at Rainford 1979 and 1980 North West Archaeological Trust Monograph.
- Cartwright J.J. (ed) 1888/9 Richard Pococke's Travels through England Camden Society, 2 Vols.
- Celoria F.S.C. and Kelly J.H. 1973 "A post medieval pottery site with a kiln base found off Albion Square, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire" City of Stoke-on-Trent Museum Archaeol Soc Report No.4.
- Chitty G. 1981 St Helens Rural Fringes Survey Report Liverpool Museum, unpublished.
- Cleaver M. 1982 "Medieval and Post-Medieval Industries of Knowsley Borough District: An Introductory Outline" in Cowell 1982, 56-54.
- Cowell R.W. 1982 Knowsley Rural Fringes Survey Report Liverpool Museum, unpublished.
- Davey P.J. 1975 Buckley Pottery Buckley Clay Industries Research Committee, Shotton.
- Davey P.J. (ed.) 1977 Medieval Pottery from Excavations in the North West Institute of Extension Studies, Liverpool.
- Davey P.J. 1978a Prescot Action Area - an archaeological view Archaeological Survey of Merseyside, Report 1.
- Davey P.J. 1978b Rainford Clay Pipes 1650 - 1750 Archaeological Survey of Merseyside, Report 3.
- Davey P.J. forthcoming. "The Post-Roman Pottery from Merseyside" in Merseyside Archaeological Society Monograph.
- Davey P.J. and McNeil R. 1985 "Excavations in South Castle Street, Liverpool 1976 and 1977" J Merseyside Archaeol Soc 4, 1980-81.
- Davey P.J. and Morgan D.E.M. 1977 "The Pottery" in Leigh 1977, 113-128.
- Dimbleby G.W. 1961 "Soil Pollen Analysis" J Soil Science 12, 1-11.
- Driesch von den A. 1976 A Guide to the Measurement of Animal Bones from Archaeological Sites Peabody Museum, Harvard University, 1-137.
- Droop J.P. and Larkin F.C. 1928 "Excavations at West Derby Castle, Liverpool" Annals of Archaeol & Anthropol, xv, 47-55.
- Ekwall E. 1922 "The Place-names of Lancashire" Chetham Society 81, Manchester.
- Faegri K. and Iversen J. 1964 Textbook of Pollen Analysis Oxford, Blackwell.
- Farrer W. 1898 "Notes of the Domesday Survey of the Land between Ribble and Mersey" Trans Hist Soc Lancashire and Cheshire xvi, 1-18.
- Farrer W. and Brownbill J. (eds.) 1907 Victoria History of the County of Lancaster Vol. 3, London.
- Freke D.J. 1979 "The Excavation of a 16th century pottery kiln at Lower Parrock, Hartfield, East Sussex, 1977" Post-Medieval Archaeol 13, 79-125.

- Games K.P. and Davey P.J. 1985 "Archaeomagnitude Determinations for Britain and South-West USA from 600 AD to 1700 AD and their Implications for Medieval Pottery Studies" Medieval Ceramics 9, 1985, 43-50.
- Harris Gibson J. 1877 "On a Beaker, Tyg, etc., lately found at Rainford; and on the Meaning of the Term "Tyg" as applied to a Drinking Cup" Trans Hist Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 30, 1877-78, 167-169.
- Hawke-Smith C. 1986 "Eighteenth Century Maps of Burslem" Staffordshire Archaeological Studies n.s. 3, 76-100.
- Higgins D. A. forthcoming "Excavations at Speke Hall, Merseyside 1981/2" J Merseyside Archaeol Soc 6
- Hillis M. 1985 The Liverpool Porcelains, Northern Ceramic Society.
- Hoult J. 1927 "Prescot in Tudor Times" Trans Hist Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 79, 112-118.
- Jones G.C. and Price J. 1985 "Excavations at the Wiend, Wigan 1982-4" Greater Manchester Archaeol J 1, 1984, 25-33.
- Knowles J. 1980 Prescot Records: The Court Rolls 1602-1648 Knowsley Library Service.
- Knowsley Borough Council 1979 Prescot Town Centre Action Area Local Plan Written Statement (draft).
- Laing L.R. 1975 "Medieval and Post-Medieval Pottery from Birkenhead Priory" Cheshire Archaeol Bull 3, 22-23.
- Leigh A. 1977 "Excavations at St Elphin's Rectory, Warrington" J Chester Archaeol Soc 60, 1977, 94-128.
- Mayer J 1855 History of the Art of Pottery in Liverpool.
- McNeil R. 1985 Archaeology in Clwyd, 17.
- Moorhouse S. 1971 "Post-medieval Britain in 1970" Post-Medieval Archaeol 5, 197-222.
- Morris M.G. 1983 The Archaeology of Greater Manchester. Volume 1: Medieval Manchester. A Regional Study Manchester.
- Oswald A. 1975 Clay Pipes for the Archaeologist British Archaeological Reports, 14.
- Philpott R.A. 1985a "Mottled Ware" in Davey and McNeil 1985, 50-62.
- Philpott R.A. 1985b "Black Glazed Ware" in Davey and McNeil 1985, 85-105.
- Philpott R.A. 1988 Historic Towns of the Merseyside Area National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside Occasional Paper No. 3, Liverpool.
- Philpott R.A. in preparation "Rescue excavations and observations in Prescot, 1987-89".
- Philpott R.A. and Davey P.J. 1984 Prescot Sampling Project North West Archaeological Trust, Liverpool.
- Platt C. 1976 The English Medieval Town Secker and Warburg, London.
- Potter S. 1959 "South-West Lancashire Place-Names" Trans Hist Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 111, 1-24.
- Pryor S. and Blockley K. 1978 "A 17th Century Kiln Site at Woolwich" Post-Medieval Archaeol 12, 30-85.
- Rutter J.A. and Davey P.J. 1980 "Clay Pipes from Chester" in The Archaeol of the Clay Tobacco Pipe 111, 41-272.
- Shaw C. 1956 The Royal Forests of Lancaster.
- Smith A. 1970 The Illustrated Guide to Liverpool Herculaneum Pottery London.
- Smith A. n.d. Liverpool Pottery City of Liverpool Museums, 74 pages.
- Tait H. and Cherry J. 1978 "Excavations at the Longton Hall Porcelain Factory. Part 1." Post-Medieval Archaeol 12, 1-29.
- Tomlinson P. and Innes J. 1980 Environmental Archaeology Report 1979-1980 Unpublished.
- Troels-Smith J. 1955 "Karakterisering af Lose Jordater" Danmarks Geologiske Undersogelse Series 4, 3, 10.
- Tyrer F. 1968 "The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Little Crosby, Lancashire: Volume 1 1702-1711" Rec Soc Lancashire and Cheshire 110.
- Webb E. 1982 "The Country Potteries of St. Helens and Prescot" Northern Ceramic Soc. Newsletter 45, 14-27.
- Wedgwood J.C. 1908 Wedgwood Family.
- Wedgwood J.C. 1913 Staffordshire Pottery and its History London.
- Young D. 1979 "The Verwood Potteries" Dorset Natural History London.