

9. Sampling Excavations in Prescot, 1983-84 (Sites 6-26).

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Introduction

Between November 1983 and June 1984 a series of twenty small sample holes was dug in various locations in Prescot under the direction of P.J. Davey and R.A. Philpott, with the help of volunteers from Merseyside Archaeological Society and members of the 1982-3 Prescot Extra-Mural Class. The location of the holes is marked on the plan (Fig. 1.3).

In the knowledge that proposed redevelopment in Prescot would destroy archaeological deposits over a large area behind the street frontage where disturbances might be less severe, a sampling project was established to assess the degree to which these deposits had survived in different parts of the town. The main concern was to discover the depth, extent and distribution of medieval stratigraphy, with a view to pinpointing sites which might merit large scale trial excavations (Philpott and Davey 1984).

Methods

The distribution of the holes clearly could not be random, due to a number of factors, not least the continuing existence of the town. Holgate's excavations of 1980-81 (Sites A-E) indicated that the street frontage had been extensively disturbed by later building and so most of the holes were located in the open plots to the rear. Another factor was the need to explore the area between Eccleston Street and Kemble Street where large scale development was due to take place. Difficulties of permission and access meant that only three squares could be investigated within the redevelopment zone, but as many as possible were examined on the periphery of the site to assess the likelihood of survival of medieval deposits in the general area. A number of sites were located close to the documented late medieval town centre where medieval deposits might reasonably be expected. In addition, several were chosen to investigate the evidence for the reclamation of the Moss to the north of the town.

The size of the holes was kept, as far as local conditions permitted, to a metre square. This format had several advantages over a core sample. It allowed the interfaces between layers and soil changes to be observed in the sections, thus cancelling out the effect of localised disturbance and small features. It also enabled pottery and other artifacts to be collected from individual horizons and features, thereby providing an indication of date. Since the aim was not to recover

structures or property boundaries, which are best observed in open area excavations, the smallest sized hole which could practicably be excavated to natural was desirable. In addition, the squares had to be of a size which could be dug by a team of two people with limited time and resources.

Recording of the holes followed usual archaeological practice. Each layer or feature was assigned a number and the characteristics of the soil noted on a standard form. Finds were collected from each context and at least one section from each hole was photographed. The main departure from normal procedure in the case of straightforward sections was to measure the stratigraphic sequence and draw a schematic representation showing the average depth of each layer, in the manner of a geological column. The sections and detailed discussion of individual holes have been published in a monograph (Philpott and Davey 1984).

The finds and archive will be housed at the Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool. The finds and context sheets are marked with a three element code referring to the project (P84), the individual site code and the layer or context number.

Soils

The soils encountered on the ridge in Prescot are characteristic of those developed over a shallow fine-medium till on Carboniferous coal measures sandstone. In general they are a well-drained silty clay, yellowish brown in colour, but tending towards dark-brown or black with an increased humic content nearer the surface. To the south of the town centre on lower-lying land the sandstone is overlain by Boulder clay but no fully developed soil profiles on the clay were encountered in the sample holes. The well-mixed nature of the soils, often with weakly differentiated horizons, is consistent with continuous cultivation. This is reinforced by the documented land-use from the late medieval period onwards, together with the location of many of the holes on intensively exploited land close to the settlement focus. On the Moss to the north of the town centre the relatively late exploitation of the peatlands yielded dark soils rich in organic matter.

Stratigraphy

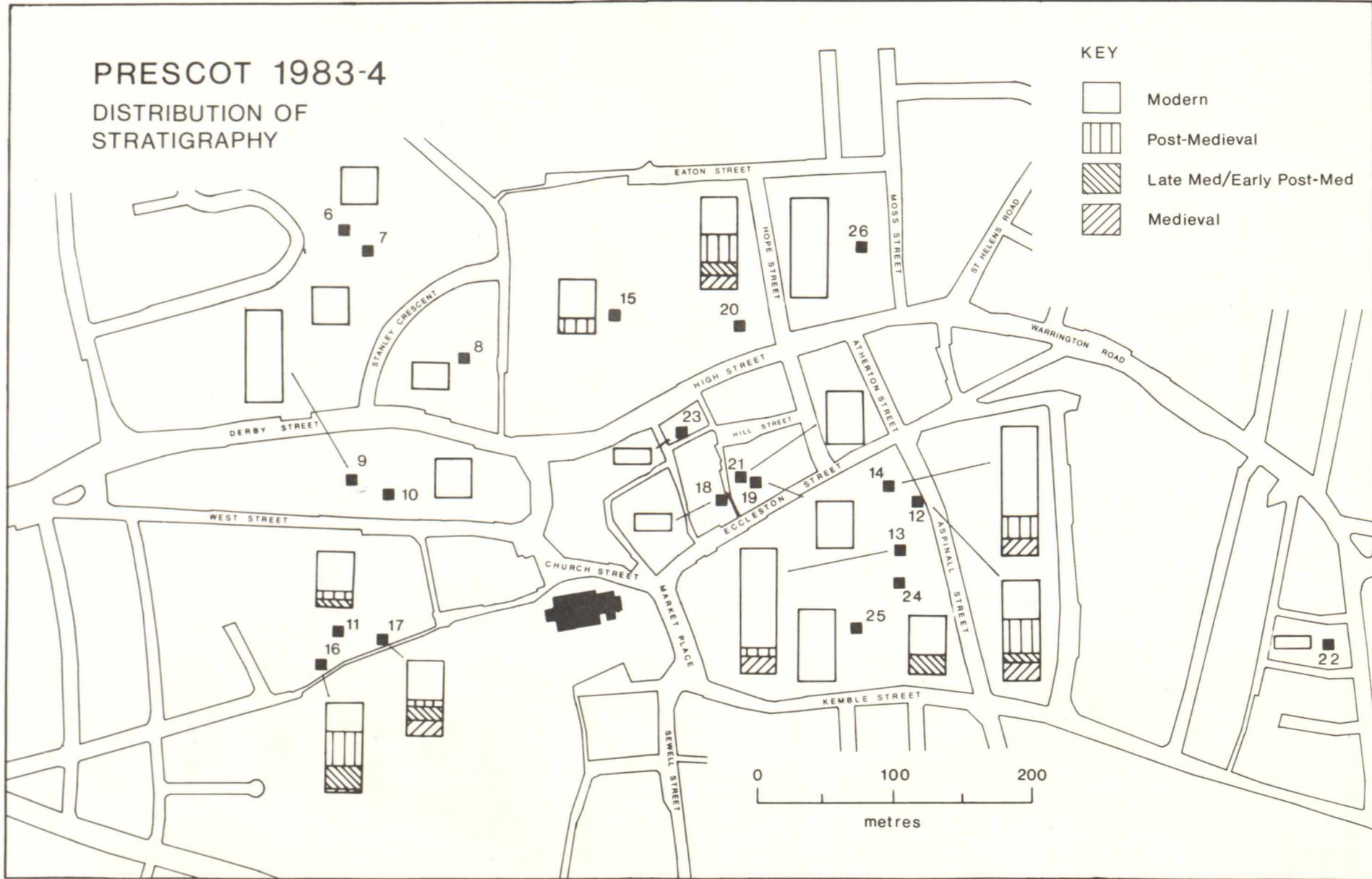
In a number of squares located on the sandstone ridge but away from the nucleus of the town the complete profile of the cultivated soil had survived and in these a consistent stratigraphic sequence was observed:

1. A light yellowish brown to buff silty clay at the base of the profile, with a few flecks of

PRESCOT 1983-4
DISTRIBUTION OF
STRATIGRAPHY

KEY

	Modern
	Post-Medieval
	Late Med/Early Post-Med
	Medieval



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9.1 Distribution of stratigraphy

charcoal and very occasional fragments of coal; a few lumps of clay and sandstone; the only finds a few abraded sherds of medieval pottery. Varying in depth from c. 6 to 33cm (squares 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20).

2. A light brown to buff silty clay soil, with a few fragments of coal and some charcoal; late medieval and/or early post-medieval pottery. Depth c. 12 to 31cm (squares 11, 12, 16, 17, 20, 24).

3. Mid yellowish brown clay soil, with increasing quantities of coal, some charcoal; 17th-18th century finds. Depth c. 9 to 46 cm (squares 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17).

4. Dark brown to black humic topsoil with abundant coal, charcoal, fragments of brick and coal ash; late 18th to 20th century finds (squares 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26).

No settlement is static, however, and demolition and construction continually disturb the soil and deposit new material. In Prescot these processes, together with other activities which have left traces in the archaeological record, are illustrated at work in the Court Rolls of the 16th and 17th century. Here are recorded such activities as the illegal digging of clay pits by potters in search of raw materials, the mining of coal in "delves", the dispersal of noxious middens set illegally in the street, and the encroachment onto the Town Moss, set aside for pasture, immediately north of the town centre (cf. Bailey 1937).

Close to the heart of the town the stratigraphic sequences were frequently extensively disturbed. The following processes were observed in the archaeological stratigraphy:

5. Levelling, which has truncated existing layers or entirely removed suspected deposits (squares 15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24).

6. Dumping to raise the ground surface artificially, often in advance of construction work; consists of imported soil (squares 9, 12, 13, 26) or demolition rubble (squares 9, 13, 20).

7. Building construction, typified by deposits of mortar, brick and stone fragments lying on a pre-existing ground surface (squares 14, 16); or construction trenches into which wall footings are set (squares 11, 14, 18).

8. Deposits of bricks, mortar and tile, often of considerable depth, derived from the demolition of 18th or 19th century structures (squares 9, 10, 12, 20, 24, 25, 26).

Figure 9.1 shows the location of the holes with a schematic representation of the depth and period of stratigraphy.

Features

The sampling project was primarily concerned with locating and identifying intact medieval soil layers rather than exposing structural remains, and few features were discovered which could be dated earlier than 1800.

The only stratified medieval feature occurred in P84/20 behind 29 High Street and consisted of a linear deposit of charcoal with lumps of blue clay approximately 35cm wide and a maximum of 10cm deep. The relative position of the feature showed that it was cut into undisturbed sandy clay subsoil, and all the pottery recovered from the two horizons immediately above it was medieval. The small area available, however, precluded interpretation.

A gully, surviving to a depth of approximately 45cm, was found running north-south down the slope at the rear of a vacant plot in Aspinall Street (P84/24). The upper layers had been cut away in later construction work and the original depth could not be determined; 16th century pottery in the upper fill suggests an early post-medieval date for the feature. It may have been used both for drainage and as a property boundary.

Structural remains were encountered in P84/25 between Kemble Street and Eccleston Street comprising the lowest course of a Bunter sandstone wall and an associated floor of Coal Measures sandstone flags with a ridged soakaway. This appears on the 1848 OS map as a small rectangular building approximately 3.5 x 4.5m, butting onto a major boundary, of which a part still survives as a sandstone wall running north-south c. 2.6m to the east of the hole. The presence of a soakaway together with the rough nature of the floor suggests a function such as a dairy or byre for the building. The 1848 OS map shows that the surrounding area remained as gardens and open ground until a relatively late date. Finds inside the structure indicate that it had fallen into disuse and was filled in during the later 19th century, but no dating evidence for the construction was recovered. The type of construction, employing large squarish Bunter sandstone for the wall, is characteristic of 18th century and later work in the region.

Behind no. 23 Eccleston Street in P84/18 the level surface of the natural clay against the foundations of a sandstone wall were encountered, which presumably comprised a small rear extension to the house.

In the square behind no. 6 Aspinall Street (P84/14) the footings of a wall were uncovered. Although almost completely demolished, the base of the wall, which was constructed of thin coal measures sandstone flags, remained. The backfill above the footings contained numerous bricks, suggesting that the superstructure was brick. Dating of the construction of the wall was facilitated by the discovery of hundreds of fragments of waste pottery and manufacturing debris from the mid to late 18th century.

Results

The sampling project established that medieval and post-medieval stratigraphy survived in a number of areas of the town. The pattern of stratigraphy in the various quarters was often fairly consistent and the results of the sample holes are discussed for each zone of the town. Brief details of the documented history of each site are given where this helps to elucidate the archaeological evidence. The principal historical sources used are a reconstruction of the town based on the surveys of 1592 and 1721 by F.A. Bailey (1937), the 1847 Tithe Map of Prescot (Lancs Record Office DRL/1 65), and the 1848 1:1056 Ordnance Survey map of Prescot.

West Street

At the time of the 1592 Survey the land on both sides of the present line of West Street was occupied by open fields. Three holes on the south side of West Street, within the area of Higher Field (as shown on the 1847 Tithe map), contained straightforward sequences of garden and cultivated soils (P84/11, 16, 17). These are characterised by light brown to buff clay soils with an increase in humic content towards the surface. The only feature encountered was the foundation trench for a wall with sandstone footings in P84/11 behind no. 7 West Street, although no wall is shown on the 1848 OS map. The earliest layers above natural contained a few abraded fragments of medieval pottery and flecks of charcoal. Coal appears first in quantity only in the early post-medieval layers, providing a useful means of distinguishing between the two phases.

The archaeological evidence for the widespread appearance of coal in the early post-medieval period is supported by documentary sources. The earliest record of coal mining in Prescot is found in a lease for Prescot Hall in 1568, which allowed extraction purely for domestic use, but commercial exploitation was not permitted on the Hall estate until 1597/8. It is likely, however, that coal had been dug locally from at least as early as the middle of the 16th century for trade (Bailey 1947, 3-7), and the copyholders are recorded as illegally digging for

coal in their tenements in the late 16th century (Bailey 1937, 304).

In 1592 Nell Miller's Croft occupied the area to the north of the later West Street and in 1847 the Tithe Map still shows the area as gardens. On this side of the street the results were inconclusive due to the difficulty of digging in confined spaces. In P84/9 brick and sandstone rubble were encountered to a depth of 1.25m, beyond which further excavation was impractical. This material probably represents a dump to level up the site prior to the construction of the houses in the late 19th century. The present difference in level between the gardens of no. 8 West Street and its immediate neighbour to the west is nearly 1m and it is likely that a layer of clay encountered in P84/10 to the rear of no. 4 West Street was a similar levelling dump.

Eccleston Street

Together with the Market Place, Eccleston Street formed the focus of the late medieval town. In the 1592 Survey the street frontage has a number of substantial houses, probably set back from the present building line and, in archaeological terms, this area was potentially one of the richest in Prescot. Excavation to the rear of shops on the north side of Eccleston Street suggested, however, that extensive levelling had taken place on the steep southern slope of the ridge, destroying all significant archaeological deposits. To the rear of no. 29 Eccleston Street, P84/19 revealed a layer of rich black humic soil, associated with garden features, lying directly on the natural sandstone. A nearby hole (P84/21) in the same plot behind no. 27 produced a brick floor set on a black humic layer. Both of these humic deposits contained only 19th century pottery. The site had clearly been levelled to natural in the 19th century when a garden was laid out and outbuildings or a yard constructed.

Earlier deposits had also been removed behind no. 23 Eccleston Street, a timber framed building fronted by a 19th century extension. Here the upper surface of the natural clay had been levelled for a floor associated with the stone wall of a demolished outbuilding (P84/18). The finds suggested that this was a 19th century development although no wall in this position occurs on the mid 19th century maps. A small excavation in 1982 to the rear of nos. 21-23 Eccleston Street, when the back wall of the timber-framed structure was being replaced, produced a quantity of mid-17th century pottery (Site 30).

Observation of two holes dug for other purposes between Eccleston Street and Hill Street show that soil creep and human activity have almost stripped this area of archaeological deposits. On Hill

Street, Council workmen resetting kerbstones reached natural sandstone 22cm below the car-park surface (P84/23) while on the western edge of the car-park on Highfield Place a hole dug by British Telecom reached similar natural c. 60cm down. In the latter hole the sections were not visible and so the overlying stratigraphy could not be examined. Holgate's excavations and observations in 1980-81 showed that extensive levelling during the construction of a lorry park in 1980 had destroyed all earlier stratigraphy on Site A, and cellars lay under the backyards and frontage of the street to the north. The maximum depth of stratigraphy observed during landscape work on High Street in January 1981 was c. 50cm and only 20th century building rubble was encountered (Sites 3 and 4).

Taken together, the evidence for the south slope of the ridge indicates that extensive destruction and levelling have occurred in this area of the town, although the possibility should not be discounted that islands of intact stratigraphy survive on the terrace nearer Atherton Street.

Aspinall Street

A creation of the late 19th century, Aspinall Street was cut through a 19th century public park between Atherton Street and Hillock (now Kemble) Street. In 1592 a croft had occupied all this area, with the exception of the frontage on Eccleston Street where a large three-bay house stood. The stratigraphic sequence in P84/12 and 13 included not only cultivated or garden soils dating from the medieval period to the 19th century associated with the croft and later park, but also layers of humic topsoil dumped to level the site for the construction of the houses on the west side of the street in the 1870's. The cultivated soils are characterised by the mid brown to yellowish buff colour described above.

A similar sequence was found in P84/14 behind no. 6 Aspinall Street, but was here complicated by the discovery of the partially robbed footings of a wall bedded on a 40cm layer of pottery manufacturing waste (see above, p. 42). The waste material included ash, clinker, saggars, kiln furniture and broken pottery, including many fragments of a white salt-glazed Staffordshire plate dated to c. 1750-1770 (Barker 1984, 79, Fig. 8, no. 67), which provided a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the wall. The 1848 Ordnance Survey map shows that the wall forms the southern side of a small extension to the rear of a large building fronting Eccleston Street. Robina McNeil's excavations in 1985 to the south west of this (Site F) revealed further walls of identical construction and with similar pottery waste under the footings and it is probable that the large building represented by this wall formed part of the late 18th

century pottery works whose drying sheds and sunning pan were discovered in the 1985 excavations. The large building was presumably demolished to make way for the construction of Aspinall Street in the early 1870's.

To the south, a gully cut into natural in P84/24 may have been a garden feature or drainage ditch and contained 16th century pottery in its upper fill (P84/24/13) but the soil horizon from which this was cut had been removed by the building of the social club in the late 19th or early 20th century (see above, p. 41).

The remains of a small byre or outbuilding were discovered in P84/25 between Kemble Street and Eccleston Street, comprising the lowest course of a sandstone wall and an associated flagged floor with a ridged soakaway. The structure is discussed above (p. 41).

The Moss

Until the 19th century Prescott was bordered on the north by extensive peat mosses, which were divided between the townships of Prescott, Eccleston and Knowsley, and at one point extended as far south as Prescott High Street.

Four squares were dug within the area of the former Moss. The first three were in gardens behind Stanley Crescent: one of these was situated immediately outside the township boundary in Knowsley (P84/6) within a field shown to have been enclosed by 1783 on the Molyneux Estate map (Lancashire Record Office DDK 1770/18), while two squares lay just inside Prescott (P84/7 and 8) on ground which formed part of Glover's Field at the time of the 1847 Tithe map. The fourth hole was located on the west side of Moss Street in the Town Moss on land which had been granted in 1508 to the inhabitants of Prescott by the lord of Eccleston manor on condition that it was used for pasture only (Bailey 1937, 281-283).

Two of the squares on Stanley Crescent (P84/6 and 7) had similar stratigraphy overlying the boulder clay and it appears that here the plough had broken up the peat leaving less than 50cm of humic topsoil. None of the finds predated 1800, but the evidence of the Estate map indicates that the field in Knowsley immediately outside the boundary of Prescott had been reclaimed by the late 18th century. The third hole (P84/8) struck a filled clay or coal pit and could not be bottomed. The square (P84/26) in the Town Moss, like the others in Stanley Crescent, produced no direct evidence for dumping and reclamation before the end of the 18th century when a row of cottages shown on the OS and Tithe maps was built. Pollen analysis of a core sample taken in 1979 on St Helens

Road, Prescott, which lay in Prescott immediately south of the township boundary with Eccleston, indicated that intensive arable activity had taken place on the site, probably during the late medieval period (Tomlinson and Innes - site 31). This suggests that this area did not form part of the Town Moss which was given by the lord of the manor of Eccleston to the inhabitants of Prescott.

Eccleston had large areas of mossland, especially in the north of the township, and much of this remained unreclaimed to a relatively late date. Some of the large townships on mossland such as Rainford and Eccleston were slow to convert their marginal land to pasture (Chitty 1981, 45). The evidence from pollen analysis suggests that on the northern fringe of the town the mossland within Prescott was taken into cultivation before the rest of the Moss which lay in Eccleston, presumably in response to greater pressure on marginal land in this small but densely populated township. The proximity of this area to the settlement focus must have been an additional factor in its comparatively early agricultural exploitation. However, the absence of finds dated to before c. 1800 in the dumping layers of the Moss Street square (P84/26) suggests that, apart from the permitted development of the Grammar School, the agreement that the Town Moss should not be reclaimed or built on seems to have been largely adhered to, and the land was used for pasture.

Warrington Road

Excavations on open ground near the site of the Mill Pottery works at the rear of a row of now demolished houses fronting Warrington Road were hampered by a deep layer of demolition debris covering most of the site, causing one attempted hole to be abandoned. Another square about 4m to the east (P84/22) indicated that the area had been thoroughly levelled down to the natural boulder clay, removing any archaeological deposits.

North of High Street

Two squares excavated north of the High Street produced markedly different stratigraphy. P84/15 behind the Registry Office at the foot of a steep slope had only post-medieval finds in humic soils which overlay glacial sands and gravels. The site had clearly been levelled and terraced in modern times.

The other hole (P84/20), to the rear of 29 High Street, revealed the greatest depth of medieval stratigraphy yet encountered in the town, including the only feature which could be certainly identified as medieval (see above, p. 41). In 1592 a potter, Edward Glover, had a message and kiln on this plot.

By 1848 the Two Bulls' Heads public house occupied nos. 27-29A Fazackerley Street (now High Street). A series of yard surfaces, one cobbled, may have been associated with the public house, and these produced a large quantity of comminuted 18th century pottery, including fragments of wasters, saggars and kiln furniture, which had been consolidated with ash and clinker and it appeared that pottery waste was again being used as hardcore.

The Distribution of Pottery Finds in Prescott

The great bulk of the finds from the sample holes consisted of pottery and the distribution and nature of the sherds recovered have thrown new light on the pottery industry in Prescott. The distribution of medieval pottery and of kiln furniture and other evidence for pottery manufacture is illustrated in Figs. 9.2 and 9.3.

Eight of the twenty sample holes produced a total of forty-six pottery sherds that appear to be medieval, although independent dating evidence is required to confirm the chronology of the local pottery. In the absence of stratified comparative material from north of the Mersey, the date of the earliest medieval pottery recovered is uncertain, but it is not likely to be earlier than the mid-14th century and may be largely 15th century (Davey, forthcoming). The total number of medieval sherds is small, but they were widely distributed around the town. The majority of sites where medieval sherds occur lie in areas which were probably arable land in the medieval period and the presence of small quantities of pottery may relate to the well-documented practice of manuring the land by spreading the kitchen midden over the fields. In Prescott during the 16th and 17th centuries the Court Rolls repeatedly order the inhabitants to disperse middens which had become a public nuisance. The density of finds of pottery is consistent if low, only three producing more than half a dozen sherds each (P84/12, 17, 20). We might expect the volume of pottery from the open fields at Prescott to diminish gradually the further away from the town centre, on the basis of economy of effort in dispersal of the middens. Preliminary results from field walking suggest that this is the case at Newton-le-Willows. Here a large modern field immediately north of the medieval town has the greatest concentration of both medieval and post-medieval pottery and other finds. The density of artifacts decreases steadily away from the High Street.

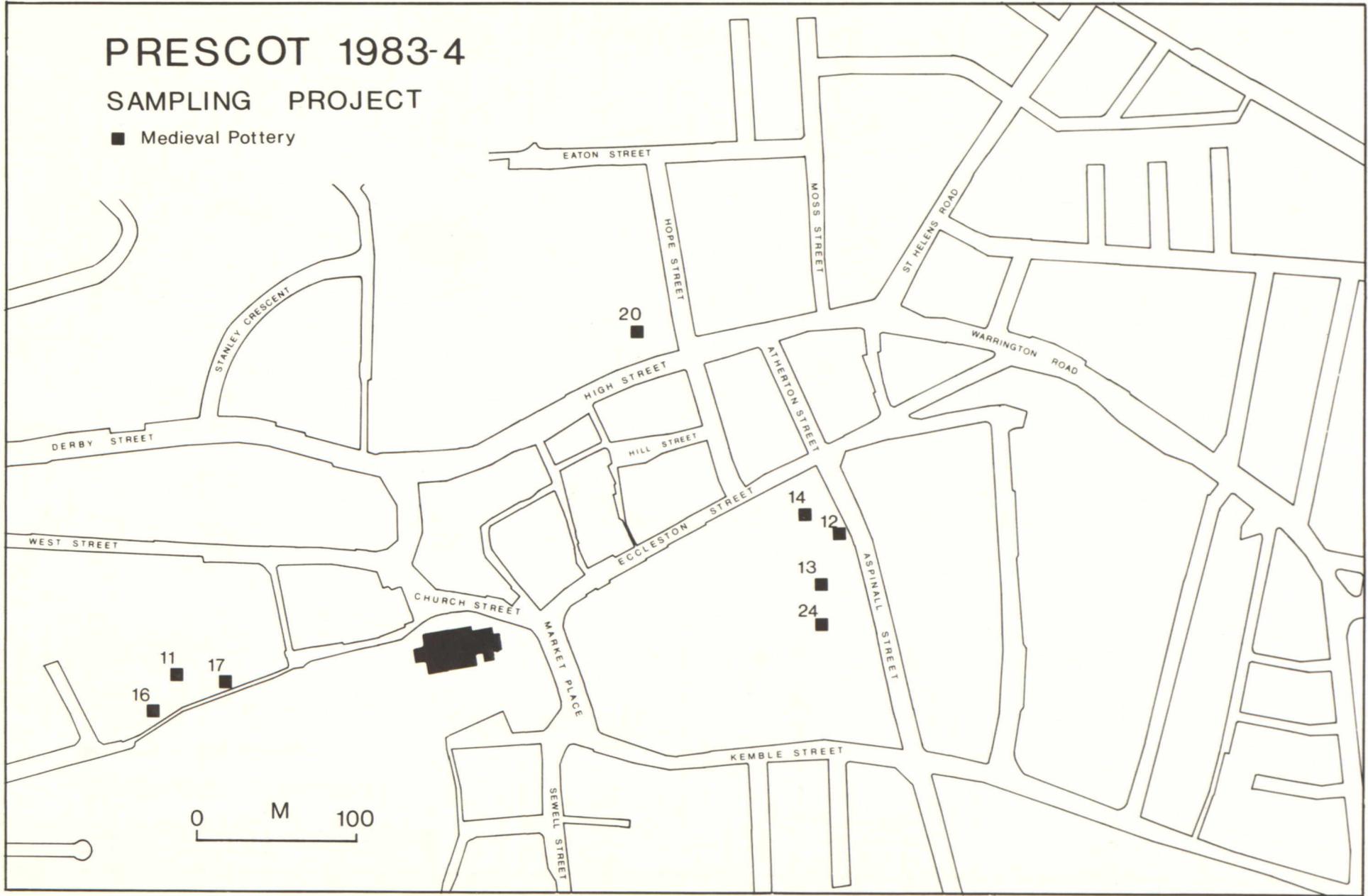
Ironically, in Prescott most squares nearer the heart of the medieval town produced little or no medieval pottery, the principal exception being P84/20 behind no. 29 High Street, which contained twenty-five sherds from three distinct layers. These represent

PRESCOT 1983-4

SAMPLING PROJECT

■ Medieval Pottery

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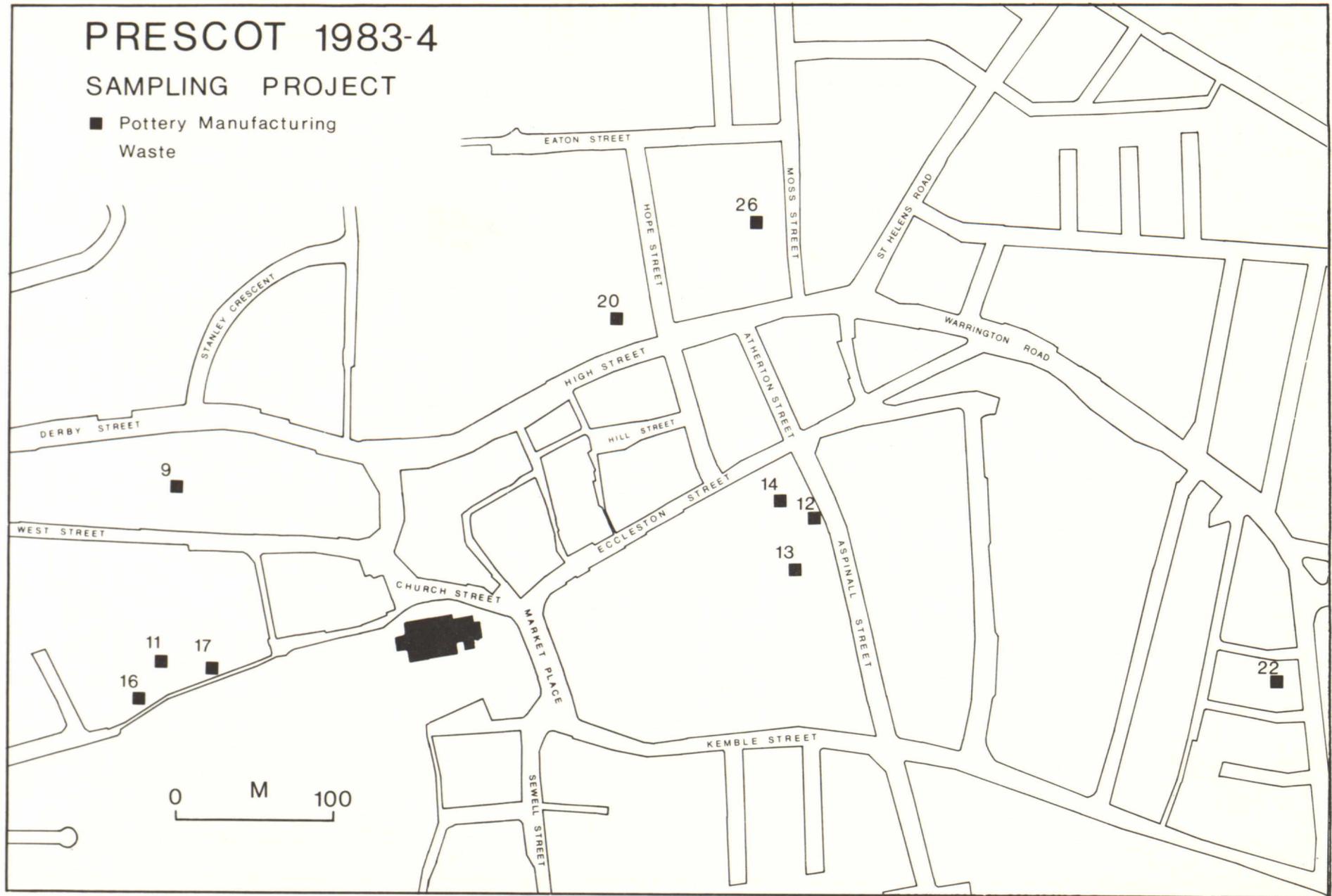


9.2 Distribution of medieval pottery

PRESCOT 1983-4

SAMPLING PROJECT

■ Pottery Manufacturing Waste



9.3 Distribution of pottery manufacturing waste

the only clearly stratified contexts containing nothing later than medieval pottery found in the sampling project; most of the other finds occurred in loosely stratified plough soil horizons. The dearth of early pottery in the town centre reflects the degree of later disturbance and levelling over a wide area which has removed most of the medieval deposits in this part of the town.

For the post-medieval period the quantity of pottery from the sample holes is considerably higher than for the medieval period. Early post-medieval wares, characterised by patchy purplish glaze on a sandy, often overfired body, occur in significantly larger quantities than medieval sherds. The 17th century sees the development of better finished purplish and black-glazed wares, although comparatively little of this date was recovered, and, towards the end of the century, the introduction of mottled ware. The same period, from the late 17th century onwards, sees a sharp increase in the quantity of pottery recovered in the sample holes and most have produced at least a few sherds from the late 17th-18th century, while several hundred sherds from individual contexts were found in others.

By the early 18th century pottery is frequently accompanied by stilts, saggars, wasters and other waste from pottery manufacture and it is clear that by this period the normal domestic pattern of use and discarding of pottery is distorted in Prescott by large scale pottery production, which together with the growth of population in the 17th and 18th century and the consequent expansion of the town, resulted in the predominance of post-medieval wares over medieval.

Ten of the twenty holes produced post-medieval saggars, kiln furniture or wasters (Fig. 9.3). This wide dispersal of pottery waste throughout the town is a result of the local practice of using the waste dumps as hardcore for buildings and surfacing and it cannot be taken as proof of a kiln in the immediate vicinity, although there is evidence that in some cases the material did not travel very far. The kiln debris from Aspinall Street (P84/14) was clearly derived from the pottery works found only a few metres to the south west in 1985.

Conclusions

The sampling project revealed medieval stratigraphy in six of the twenty holes (Fig. 9.2). The stratified medieval deposits tended to occur on the edge of the town rather than in the centre, and in general the deposits were shallow, in some cases appearing to be only loosely stratified plough horizons. The peripheral location of the medieval deposits in part reflects the extensive disturbance

of the ground in the centre of Prescott in the post-medieval and modern periods. Holgate's excavations in particular revealed that large areas of the cellaring and other disturbance along street frontages had removed structural remains (Sites A-E). The absence of any deep surviving medieval stratigraphy away from the frontages, however, requires some explanation.

The dearth of deep stratigraphy is partly due to the topography of Prescott. The ridge on which the late medieval town stood drops away steeply to the south, and erosion and soil creep on the slope have been inimical to the formation and survival of any depth of deposit. It is significant that some of the deepest medieval stratigraphy was encountered on the gentler north slope to the rear of the High Street.

Prescott lacks the depth of medieval deposits which elsewhere are associated not only with successive phases of building but also the intensive use of rear plots for rubbish disposal, small scale industry, such as smithing, tanning or pottery manufacture, and domestic activities, such as bread making, livestock rearing and brewing. Most of these activities are documented for the early post-medieval period in Prescott, but so far little or no archaeological evidence has been recovered for them. Although the sample holes were too small to examine structural remains, nevertheless the lack of rubbish pits or other features, apart from the one linear charcoal deposit behind the High Street, is particularly surprising, and may be due to the practical difficulty of cutting rubbish pits through the sandstone bedrock which resulted in a preference for surface middens.

In addition the absence of deep medieval stratigraphy reflects to a large extent the nature of the settlement, and in particular the agricultural basis of the economy in the medieval period, compared with larger administrative and ecclesiastical centres such as Chester and Shrewsbury.

Another related problem is the scarcity of finds of medieval date from the sampling project. This can be attributed in part to the peripheral location of many of the holes, where only scattered sherds from manuring of the fields have been recovered. The general scarcity of finds in all the excavations however is consistent with archaeological and documentary evidence which suggests that the development of the town occurred late in the medieval period and the town probably supported a relatively small population until the expansion of the 17th century.

In the wider context of Merseyside as a whole, medieval pottery is comparatively scarce compared

with areas such as the Midlands or Cheshire, and in Prescot itself, which is likely to have been producing pottery in the medieval period, only a little over five hundred sherds have been recovered in a total of six area excavations and twenty sample squares between 1980 and 1985. The shortage of finds from the medieval and early post-medieval period may have a wider significance. In 1586 the vicar of Prescot wrote that of the town population of just over four hundred most were under twenty-six years old, and the majority of families were unable to support themselves (Bailey 1937, 300). Such pleas were a common feature of the time and were prone to a degree of hyperbole, but nevertheless, taken with the pottery evidence, it suggests that the material culture of the majority of the townspeople was fairly low. Prescot appears to have suffered heavily from the rising prices of the 16th century, perhaps due to the shortage of agricultural land within the township, and the standard of living of its inhabitants relying on trade may have remained low throughout the century.

Although a nucleated settlement had developed by the mid-14th century, the town lacked a prosperous and well populated hinterland which might have enabled it to grow into a major commercial and administrative centre in the medieval period. The town served primarily as a market focus for the sale of local agricultural produce and small-scale manufactured goods, supplemented by limited trade from farther afield. The latter was assisted by exemptions on tolls for the town's goods by virtue of the charter granted in 1447 to all tenants of King's College, Cambridge which included the town of Prescot (Bailey 1937, 64-73). Although Prescot is unusually well-documented for a town in the North-West from the early post-medieval period onwards, nevertheless it is clear that the town did not develop beyond a local market and distribution centre until the Industrial Revolution.

The nationwide population increase was reflected in the growth of Prescot from the 17th century onwards as the 1743 Edge plan shows, and the same period saw the development of industry in the town, both of which were reflected in the upsurge in the volume of late 17th and 18th century pottery from the sample squares. By the Industrial Revolution, coal mining, pottery manufacture and watchmaking were well established in the town, and all three exported their products on the new Turnpike roads and canals. Of these pottery production has left most archaeological traces, in the form of the finished and discarded objects as well as the debris from manufacturing processes, while a possible bell-pit from coal or clay extraction was also detected in Stanley Crescent (P84/8).

The sampling project has provided a cross-section of the archaeological deposits in locations throughout Prescot which will not only be of value in determining future archaeological strategy in the town, but also, when set against the background of earlier archaeological and documentary evidence, adds a little colour to the sketchy picture of the early history and development of the town.

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