

## EXCAVATIONS AT 58 FRENCH STREET, SOUTHAMPTON, 1976

By DAVID A. HINTON

AMONG the many surviving medieval structures in Southampton is the house at 58 French Street, now (1977) being restored by the Department of the Environment. With its undercroft, stone side walls, two-storied end blocks and central open hall, the house has been described as 'perhaps the earliest complete town house in England' (Faulkner 1975, 107), and opportunity was therefore taken of the restoration to see if further information could be gained about its history. The work was undertaken by the Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, with the aid of a grant from the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate.

The building has recently been fully described (Faulkner 1975), and excavations were carried out to elucidate some of the points discussed in that report. At the external east end of the building, on the street frontage, a trench was dug to see if anything could be discovered about the open arcade which may have supported the jetty of the upper floor. Unfortunately it was found that modern disturbance had removed all hope of clarifying this.

The light well of the undercroft's north-east window, now inside the building, was cleared out, and the débris, which included large quantities of waste from clay pipe manufacture (described below), showed that the window was blocked between 1800 and 1850. The light well was found to have been dug through an earlier pit (layer 307) containing 24 unglazed, locally-made coarse sherds, many clearly from a single vessel, a lamp base in the same fabric, and four sandy grey sherds, one with a raised cordon, probably an import from Normandy. At the bottom of the pit was part of the

articulated vertebral column (thoracic region) of a cow. Such articulation is a feature common in early medieval Southampton (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, 33). A small 'sondage' outside the south-east corner showed that there had never been a light well or window at that point, and it was also shown that the stones are missing from the wall at this point only on the inside face, the outside face being complete. This is further evidence that there was access to the ground floor front room from the street at this corner (Faulkner 1966, 125-7).

Within the undercroft, the floor levels abutting the east wall were examined. This trench showed that the stone steps which gave access to the street do not project into the undercroft, and have never done so, since there is no scar on the face of the east wall. Since the original floor, a much disturbed chalky mortar, seemed to stop short 29 cm from the wall, it may be that there were two wooden steps to complete the flight.

At the west end of the undercroft, the floor has been disturbed even more than at the street frontage end. There was a small pit against the west end (layer 107) containing two south-western French sherds, and three sherds, including a rim from a thinly-potted stoneware beaker, probably fourteenth-century. The most interesting feature, however, was the arched opening in the south wall, by the south-west corner, 'a fireplace or a blocked door' (Faulkner 1975, 104). This was blocked with securely mortared rubble, and the front of the blocking was removed, to reveal yet more mortared rubble behind it. The opening proved to be a door, with rebated jambs. Both rebates contained two hinge pintle emplacements, implying a two-

leaved door. Two emplacements were empty sockets, one retained its lead plug, and one also contained some ironwork. Cut into the western rebate were two small slots, presumably to take strap-hinges standing proud of the door. With the jambs revealed, it was possible to see that the doorway was certainly an original part of the building.

At the same time as the door was being unblocked on the inside, a trench was being excavated on the outside, in the narrow stretch of garden which stood between the south wall and a paved path. Below the garden soil was a disturbed mortar level, and below that a coherent layer of mortar and rubble (layer 605) containing 22 French imported sherds; 1 ?Spanish handle (cf. Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, no. 1280, attributed to 1300-50); 24 English glazed (inc. Fig. 1, no. 4) and 35 English unglazed sherds (inc. Fig. 1, no. 5), which is not considered to be a sealed medieval deposit. Below it, however, a thick layer of yellow mortar (layer 609) was certainly uncontaminated. Contents: two south-western French sherds, one a Polychrome parrot-beak spout, one with an applied rib (as Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, no. 1014, attributed to late thirteenth century); 1 north French ?base with cordon (cf. *ibid.*, no. 974, 1250-1300); 3 other French sherds; 1 ?Spanish; 14 English glazed and 10 English unglazed (inc. Fig. 1, 3). Layer 609 both overlay and filled the space between two stone walls, each 20-25 cm wide, which projected from the south wall of the building, and disappeared under the path.

The two walls were found to be simply a course of rubble rammed against the earth behind, and in places no more than a skin of mortar. They flanked a flight of steps leading down to the door in the undercroft wall. Pieces of blue slates, rammed vertically against the sides of the walls, were presumably to prevent water seeping through onto the steps. These steps no longer survived, but

their treads and risers could be made out in a thin band of white mortar against a gravel and clay backing. The treads of the steps were probably wood, as black patches in the mortar may have been all that remained of them. Although the steps only survived so vestigially, it seemed better to preserve what remained than to dig them out to see what was behind them. A narrow cut established that the stair well, like the light well at the east end, had been cut through an earlier pit (layer 620) containing 4 unglazed local coarse sherds, 2 sandy ?intrusive, 26 bone fragments, including cattle, pig and fowl.

A 50 cm wide slot was cut eastwards from the eastern stair wall, to clarify the construction. This also showed that there were earlier layers cut by the stairs. Below the mortar, 609, which stopped at the level of the top of the walls, was a gravelly soil, 25 cm deep (layer 610) containing 4 south-western French Polychrome sherds; 5 other south-western French; 4 other French; 1 Normandy or Spanish; 15 English glazed, including bowl rim (as Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, no. 541, attributed to 1300-50), jug rim with rod handle (as *ibid.*, nos. 517-8, attributed to 1300, and 1300-50), and jug rim (Fig. 1, no. 1); 12 unglazed English sherds; unglazed lamp (Fig. 1, no. 2). Below layer 610 was yellow clay, cut by a pit. There was not enough space to pursue these features. The trench proved that there was never a garderobe associated with the building between the stairs and the door into the hall, as had been suggested as a possibility (Faulkner 1975, 107). Layer 610 was either earlier than the building, or was contemporary with it, being a layer of rubble deposited to build up the ground surface and make it a dry footing, after the steps and the undercroft walls had been built. It was found that the wall of the building, where protected by the soil and mortar levels, was plastered, and presumably this was the original medieval finish.

A modern lavatory which projected from

the north-west corner of the building has now been removed, revealing that the quoins are rebated on this corner for a door, hinged to swing back from the lane which ran along the north side of the house. Since there are no scars on the quoins further up, it does not seem that there was a north-south wall at first floor level attached to the building. The ground floor door seems most likely therefore to have been a gate, either in a screen wall, or in an alley between no. 58 and another free-standing building to its west.

There remains to be explored the blocked door from the undercroft at the west end. It may be possible to pursue this when restoration has been completed, for it is still far from clear whether it is an original feature. The newly revealed door in the south wall might suggest that the west door was a later insertion, added after the south wall door had been blocked. The pottery found in the blocking strongly suggests that the south door had a very short period of use: the contents of layers 609 and 610 are very similar, although 610 must be earlier. The types and proportions of the sherds are similar, and the parallels cited do not indicate different dates: both groups seem to be in the 1300-1350 bracket. That the steps had only a short life is also suggested by the unworn condition of the door jambs.

Further excavation may help to unravel the problems of the tenement arrangements around 58 French Street, and enable this important building to be further understood. Provisionally, however, it can be said that the pottery of layer 610 shows that the attribution on stylistic grounds of the building to a date in the first quarter of the fourteenth century (Faulkner 1975, 107) is likely to be correct; and that layer 609 shows that it was modified soon afterwards. Could this be another example of the physical changes made to the town after the notorious French raid of 1338 (Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, 32)?

## FINDS

### *The Pottery* (Fig. 1)

The pottery has been described above with the layers in which it was found, as its importance is as dating evidence. Such a small quantity cannot be expected to add to knowledge of Southampton's extensive range of medieval ceramics. A few sherds of interest have been illustrated:

1. ?Jug rim with small side handle and finger-pressed cordon. Light sandy fabric, ?an English copy of French pottery (layer 610).
2. Lamp, unglazed local coarse ware. Cf. Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, nos. 422, 444 (attributed to 13th century) (layer 610).
3. Cooking-pot rim with the flange stabbed on the inside. Unglazed local coarse ware. Cf. Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, nos. 469-72 (13th century) (layer 609).
4. Foot of large cauldron, glazed inside. Local sandy fabric. Cf. Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, no. 583 (1300-50) (layer 605). Metal-imitating pottery like this is usually 14th/15th century.
5. Cooking-pot rim, unglazed local large-grained sandy fabric, with finger-waved flange. Cf. Platt and Coleman-Smith nos. 469-72 (13th century) (layer 605).

The sherds include the wide range of imports expected in Southampton. A handle from layer 605 and a body sherd from 610 have been analysed by thin sectioning by Dr. D. F. Williams as part of a research project on Spanish wares, and were found to be petrologically different, but their sources cannot yet be precisely identified. The full results of the research will be published elsewhere. The pre-building pits, 307 and 620, both produced unglazed coarse sherds which are likely to be twelfth century or earlier.

### *Ridge-tiles* (Fig. 1)

Fragments of triangular crests were found, comparable to Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, nos. 1416, 1424 etc. One unstratified frag-

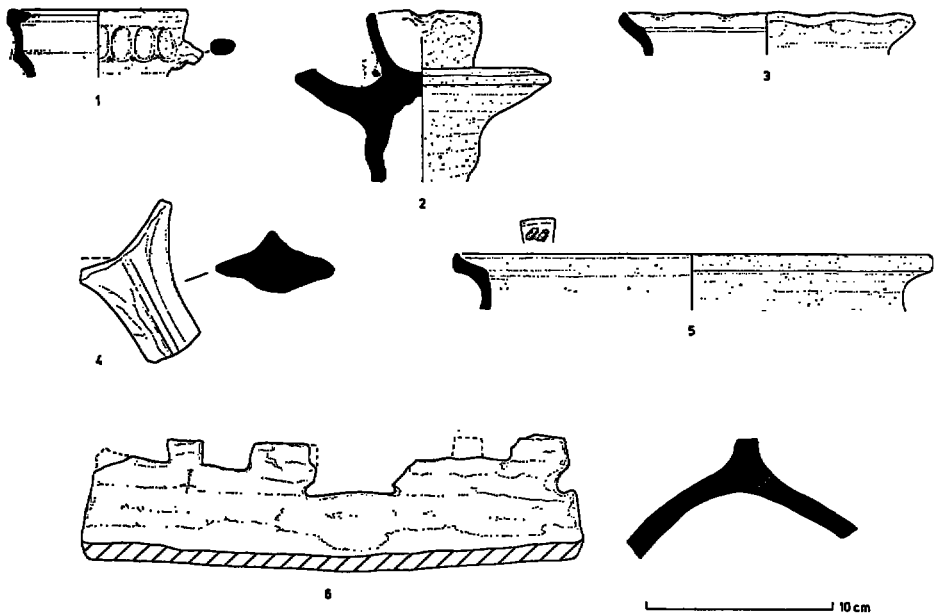


Fig. 1. Pottery and ridge tile from 58 French Street, Southampton. 1: Jug rim (Layer 610). 2: Lamp (Layer 610). 3: Cooking-pot rim (Layer 609). 4: Cauldron foot (Layer 605). 5: Cooking pot-rim (Layer 605). 6: Ridge tile (Layer 609). Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$ . Drawing by Susan Davies.

ment with a lower triangular crest, cf. *ibid.* no. 1396 (attributed to thirteenth century) had a red sandy fabric with grog and iron inclusions which was very similar to the fabric of:

6. Ridge tile with an irregular battlemented crest, and thick amber glaze. None like this has been recorded previously from Southampton, and I have not noticed one from elsewhere. From layer 609, so presumably first half of the fourteenth century.

#### Brick and Daub

A fragment of well-levigated hard sandy brick, 25 cm thick, was found in layer 620, and so is likely to be twelfth-century if not intrusive. A fragment of daub mixed with large quantities of barley straw and vetch was from layer 609, so is likely to belong to the first half of the fourteenth century.

#### Ironwork

The iron located was heavily corroded, and X-ray photography revealed that only one object other than nails was found. This was a single loop oval buckle frame and pin, 52 mm wide, from layer 609, so probably dated to the first half of the fourteenth century.

#### Clay tobacco-pipes. By R. J. Williams

A very large quantity of kiln debris, unfired stems, slag, wasters and broken pipes was found in the filling of the light well (layer 303). Only part of the deposit could be removed: even so, fragments of 251 bowls can be recognised, and the stem wasters alone weighed 4.15 kg!

The bowls can be identified as follows: 1 with Lion and Arms: WB on short pointed spur, for William Browne (Arnold 1977, Fig. 8, 3).

8 with Lion and Arms: IR on long pointed spur, for John Russell (similar to but not identical with Arnold 1977, Fig. 8, 7).

77 large fluted: IR on spur, for John Russell (Arnold 1977, Fig. 10, 26).

50 small fluted: IR on spur for John Russell (Arnold 1977, Fig. 10, 23).

2 with large and small fluting: IR on spur, for John Russell.

30 with Sun and Compass: IS on spur, for James Skeams (Arnold 1977, Fig. 10, 27).

70 plain without makers' marks, typologically to be dated 1760-1800.

13 unidentifiable.

William Browne was making pipes in the first half of the eighteenth century, and had premises in French Street (Arnold 1977, 329). John Russell is recorded as active in Southampton in 1794 and 1802, and James Skeams appears in Salisbury records between 1839 and 1867 (Arnold 1977, 331, 333). The French Street debris may be from a workshop used by both makers, abandoned when Skeams left for Salisbury.

#### *Bone*

Fragments of bone came from all layers, but the only coherent groups were from the pre-building pits, layers 307 and 620, neither of which, of course, survived intact. Miss Jennie Coy of the D.o.E. Faunal Remains Project, University of Southampton, reported on them, and a synopsis of the results is incorporated in the layer descriptions. The full report is lodged at Fortress House, London.

#### *Acknowledgements*

I am grateful to Jonathan Coad, Inspector of Ancient Monuments, for his help on this project, and to other members of the Inspectorate's staff. I should also like to thank the University students who took part in the project, and Susan Davies for her drawing.

Mr. R. G. Thomson, of the Southampton City Museums, looked at the pottery, and the identifications are all based on his comments. I acknowledge this and other help from Mr. Thomson with gratitude. I am also grateful to Jennie Coy, Frank Green and David Williams for their work on the bones, daub and pot fabric respectively, and to Robert Williams and Christopher Arnold for help on the clay pipes.

#### REFERENCES

- Arnold, C J 1977 The Clay Tobacco-Pipe Industry: An Economic Study, in Peacock 1977, 313-336.
- Faulkner, P A 1966 Medieval undercroft and town houses, *Archaeol. J.* **123**, 120-35.
- Faulkner, P A 1975 58 French Street, in Platt and Coleman-Smith 1975, **1**, 104-7.
- Peacock, D P S (ed.) 1977 *Pottery and Early Commerce*, London.
- Platt, C S and Coleman-Smith, R 1975 *Excavations in Medieval Southampton*, 2 vols., Leicester.

*Author:* D. A. Hinton, Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton.