

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORDING AT 37–39 HIGH STREET, ALTON, HAMPSHIRE

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ABSTRACT

Limited excavation in advance of building work at 37–39 High Street, Alton, Hampshire, has revealed evidence for medieval building activity, probably associated with the 'Stonehouse', documented in 1311. Clay tiles of earlier date were also found, suggesting a relatively high-status building. The back of the plot contained a series of cesspits dated 12th–18th century. Later medieval and early post-medieval levels had been truncated by 18th- and 19th-century cellaring.

INTRODUCTION

Planning permission for the renovation of 37–39 High St., Alton, Hampshire (Fig 1; NGR: SU 71733931), was granted by East Hampshire District Council with a condition for an archaeological watching brief being attached. Excavations in the past at Alton have recovered much important archaeology (Hughes 1976), making a planning condition an inevitable consequence of development within the core of the town.

Historical Background

Settlement within the town of Alton has a long history. Excavations in the town have found material stretching from the prehistoric period to the present day (Bowden *et al*, 1988), including an important Roman cemetery (Millett 1986). There had been a Roman small town at Neatham, less than 2 km north-east of the medieval town (Millett & Graham 1986). Excavations at Johnson's Corner, in the High Street close to the present development, revealed important Roman, Saxon and later materials (Millett 1983).

The medieval town was probably founded on the present site in the 12th century, although information on it is scanty (Hardy 1903, 479). The upper reaches of the River Wey run through the centre of the town's High Street, which slopes down to it on either side. This stream divides the two ancient manors of Alton, known as Alton Westbrook (on the right or west bank) and Alton Eastbrook (on the left or east bank). The Abbot of Hyde held five hides at Eastbrook at the time of Domesday, with a further five hides making up the manor of Westbrook. The latter land appears to have been in the king's hands in 1086 (Munby 1982, 6.1). This royal connection continued throughout most of the medieval period, and the bailiffs of the town paid their farm to the Crown. A Guildhall is mentioned in 1434, but there is little else recorded of the town in the *Victoria County History* before the 16th century. By 1738 there were 500 people in Alton engaged in making barracan, a kind of camlet. Other trades at this time included fulling, paper making, tanning and brewing (Hardy 1903, 479–80).

Documentary research has suggested that a building known as 'Stonhouse' was erected on or near the present site of 37–39 High Street in the 14th century. This is first mentioned in 1311 when John de Westcote granted the property to Peter Clyve of Alton, and Amice his wife, at a chief rent of 20/- per annum (Himsworth 1984, no. 2002). The records for the Stonehouse are particularly complete, giving an almost full list of tenants from 1480 (Table 1), when it was granted to Winchester College (*ibid*, no 2013). Until 1656, these tenants seem to be largely gentlemen, but from hereon it was often leased to tradesmen. In 1726 the property was subdivided into two tenements that were subsequently leased separately. The first part, on

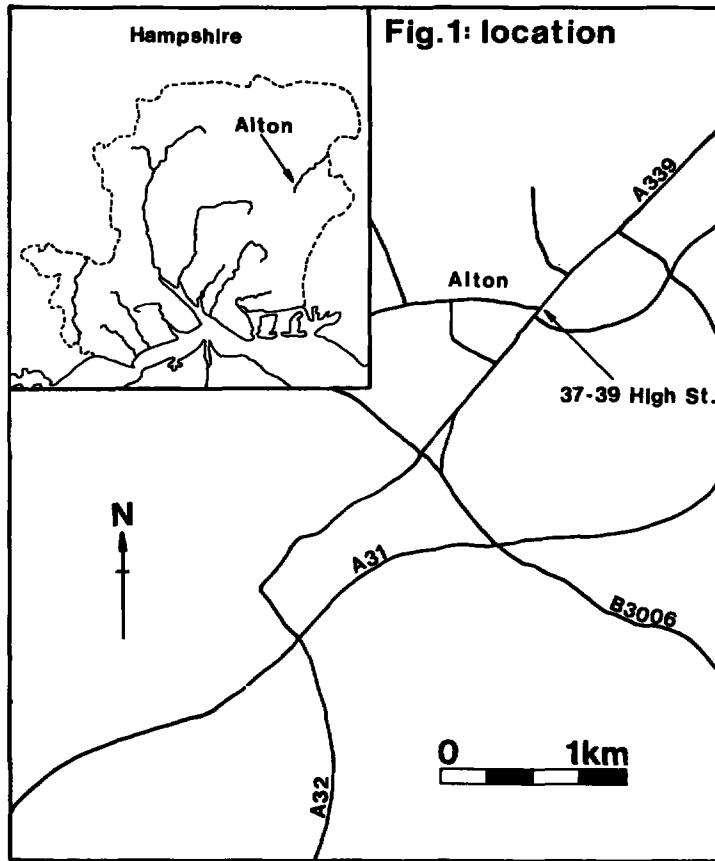


Fig. 1 37-39 High Street, Alton: location plan

the NE side, was recorded as taking up a street frontage of 21 ft 9 in when leased to Henry Smith, a saddler, in 1782 (*ibid.*, no. 25292). The second part was granted in the same year to Thomas and William Lee, mercers, and had a street frontage of 24 ft (*ibid.*, no. 25317). These leases also record that there was a 'court', garden and brewhouse attached behind the street-front buildings.

EXCAVATION RESULTS (Figs 2-4)

Trenches 2 and 5-10 inclusive revealed archaeological remains of only minor importance. Readers are referred to the original report for

details (Currie 1997a). Repositories holding copies of the report are listed below in the acknowledgements.

Trench 1

This trench was a pit *c.* 2.5 m × 2.5 m excavated within the building. The upper layers, to a depth of 0.8 m, were much disturbed by late post-medieval activity. The main features of interest were three pit-like features cutting into the chalky bedrock.

In the south corner of the trench, was a shallow pit-like feature (17). This was approximately 0.7 m × 0.5 m, cutting only 0.11 m into bedrock. It contained a clayey fill with many chalky fragments

Table 1 Some owners and tenants of the Stonehouse 1311–1870 (after Himsworth 1984)

1311 Peter Clyve of Alton
1470 Nicholas Husey, Nicholas Hervey, Bartholomew Wyllesden & John Forthes
1470 William Combe, Thomas Fawkes, William Balon & William Barton
1480 The Warden of Wichester College
1521–58 John Skynner of Alton Westbrook
1558–95 Richard Butler
1595–1612 Christopher Walliston of Stratfield Saye, gent
1612–31 Edward Heyes
1631–56 Jethro Beale, clerk
1656–81 Laurence Gale, mercer
1681–84 Thomas Gale, gent
1684–98 William Cranstone, maltster
1698–1705 Ann Cranstone, widow
1705–19 Atkins Wakeford, maltster

From 1726 the house was divided into two parts and leased separately:

NE building	SW building
1782–96 Henry Smith, saddler	Thomas/William Lee, mercers
1796–1803 Jeremiah Waring, clothier	1789–1796 Thomas Edward, ironmonger
1803–31 William Binstead, ironmonger	1810 Thomas Edward jnr?, ironmonger
?–1870 Joseph Dyke, draper	?–1869 Charles Ginger, ironmonger

within. The only find was part of a base of a coarseware tripod pitcher of medieval date. The south end of this feature was cut through by another pit-like feature (15) in the far south corner of the trench.

The third feature was a large rock-cut pit, at least 1.45 m wide on the NE-SW alignment. The full extent was not found on the NW-SE alignment, but that excavated was 1.35 m wide. It was excavated about 0.26 m into undisturbed bedrock, and contained some sherds of a medieval jug, possibly of the 13th–14th century. There was little other material within this pit.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was 23 m in length, and excavated against the NE boundary of the property to lay a foundation for a new boundary wall. A sewer pipe and post-medieval cellaring extended along parts of the trench, removing much of the later archaeology.

Despite this, there were a number of features cut into chalk bedrock, both beneath the sewer pipe and the cellars. These were all pits of a similar type, being interpreted as mainly cess pits. The first four to be encountered (30, 32, 37, and 42) respected

the boundary wall on the NE side of the trench. The first of these was feature 30. This was 1.75 m wide, and cut undisturbed soils by *c.* 0.5 m. It contained a wet silty clay fill (31) that contained no artefacts. It was thought from the similarity of the fill type with other adjacent pits to be a cess pit.

The next pit (32) was 3.2 m wide, but the greater bulk of this feature remained to the south of the excavated area. The full extent of this feature was not explored because of safety considerations, but that excavated was found to extend 1.2 m beyond the normal level of the undisturbed soils (over 2.1 m below the present ground surface). The latter level was, on average, between 0.9 m and 1.3 m below present ground level. Three distinctive fills were observed (33–35), all made up of cesty clay silts. The uppermost layer contained a sherd of tin-glazed earthenware of 17th/early 18th century date, whilst the lowest layers contained late medieval ceramics. This suggested that this pit was dug out regularly over the centuries, leaving only the lower fills from its earliest years. The pit was overlain by a brick cellar, suggesting that it was last used in the 17th or 18th century.

The next pit (36) contained a similar cesty clay

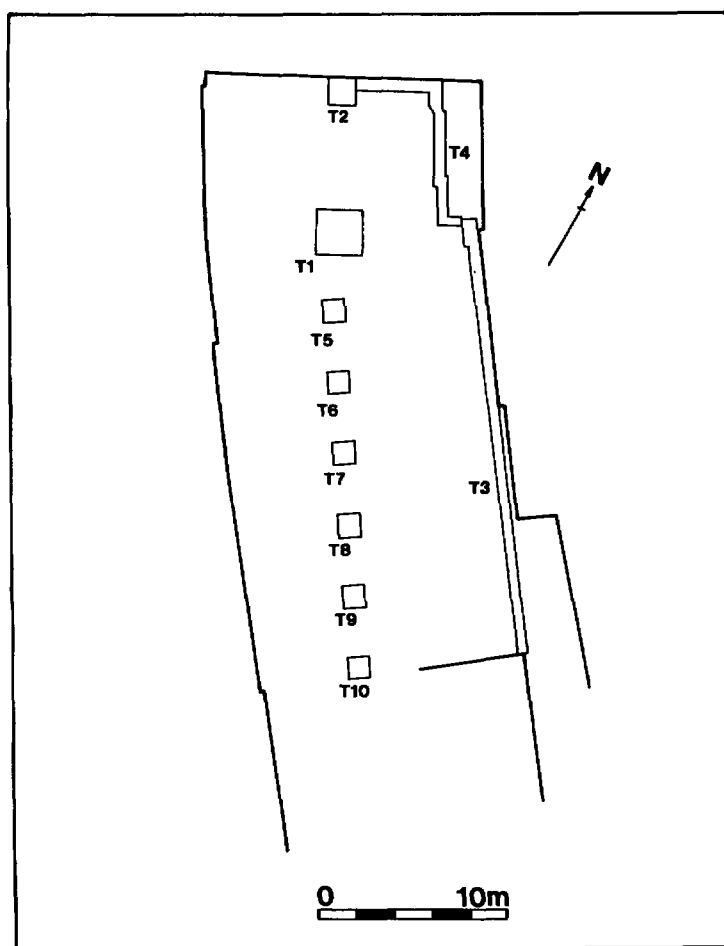


Fig. 2 37-39 High Street, Alton: location of excavation trenches

silt (37) to the lowest layer of feature 32. This contained a rim sherd of a late medieval jug. Again the full extent of this feature was not explored because of safety considerations, but that excavated by archaeological means was found to be at least 0.6 m below the normal level of undisturbed soils in this trench.

Partly underlying another cellar (40) was a further pit (41) that contained a cesty clay silt (42). This was 1.3 m wide, cutting up to 0.9 m into undisturbed bedrock, and respecting the line of the wall of the adjoining building. This fill had a moderately high

organic content. Much charcoal, with some small bone, and at least one carbonised cereal grain, was observed with it. The fill contained a number of sherds of medieval pottery, mainly coarsewares, possibly of the 12-13th centuries.

There were two more features cutting undisturbed soil south of feature 41. These were south of the end of the wall of the building on the property boundary, and so did not seem to respect that boundary, extending north-eastwards beyond the extent of the trench. These were thought to be later post-medieval pits.

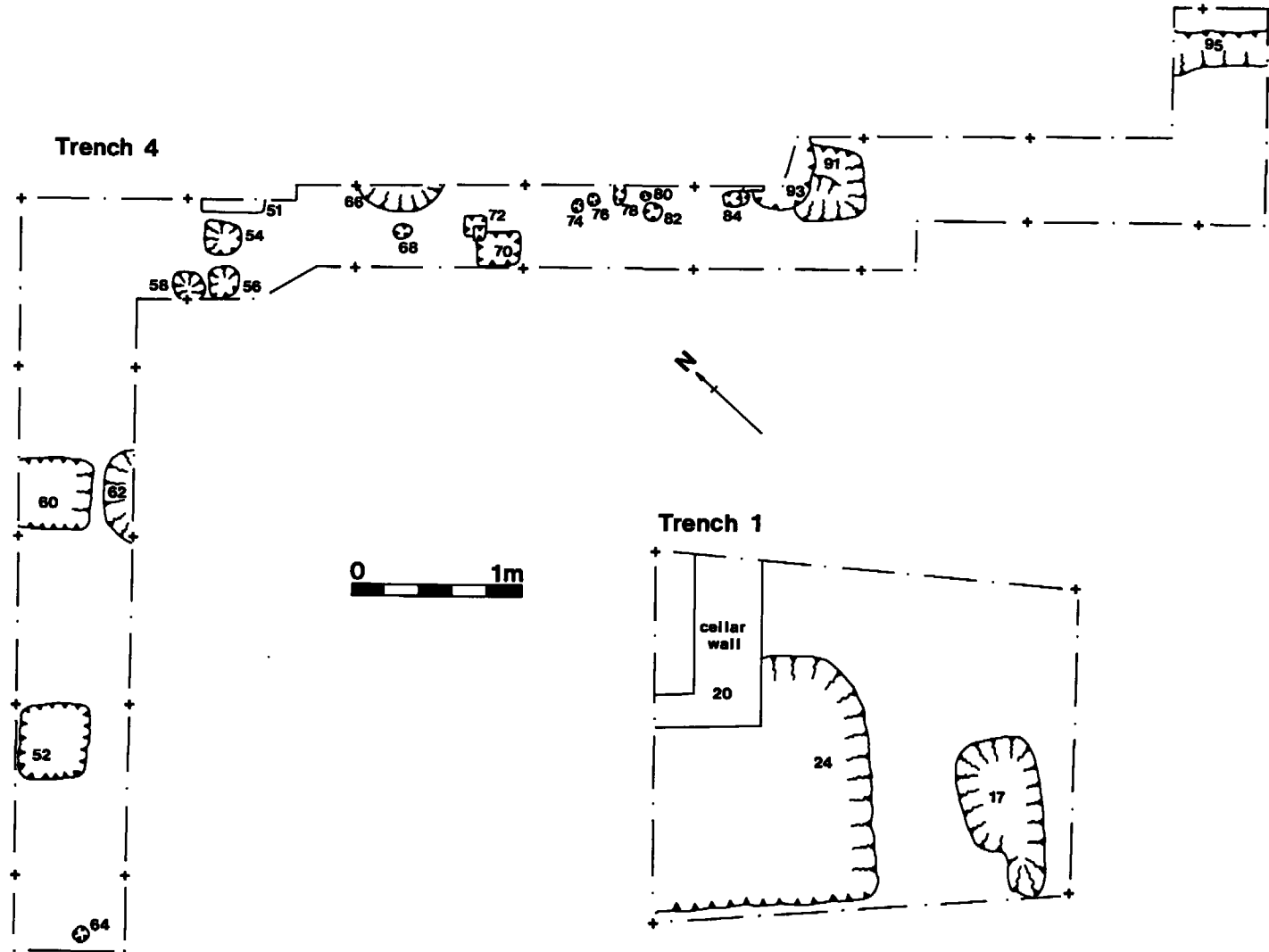


Fig. 3 37-39 High Street, Alton: plan of trenches 1 and 4

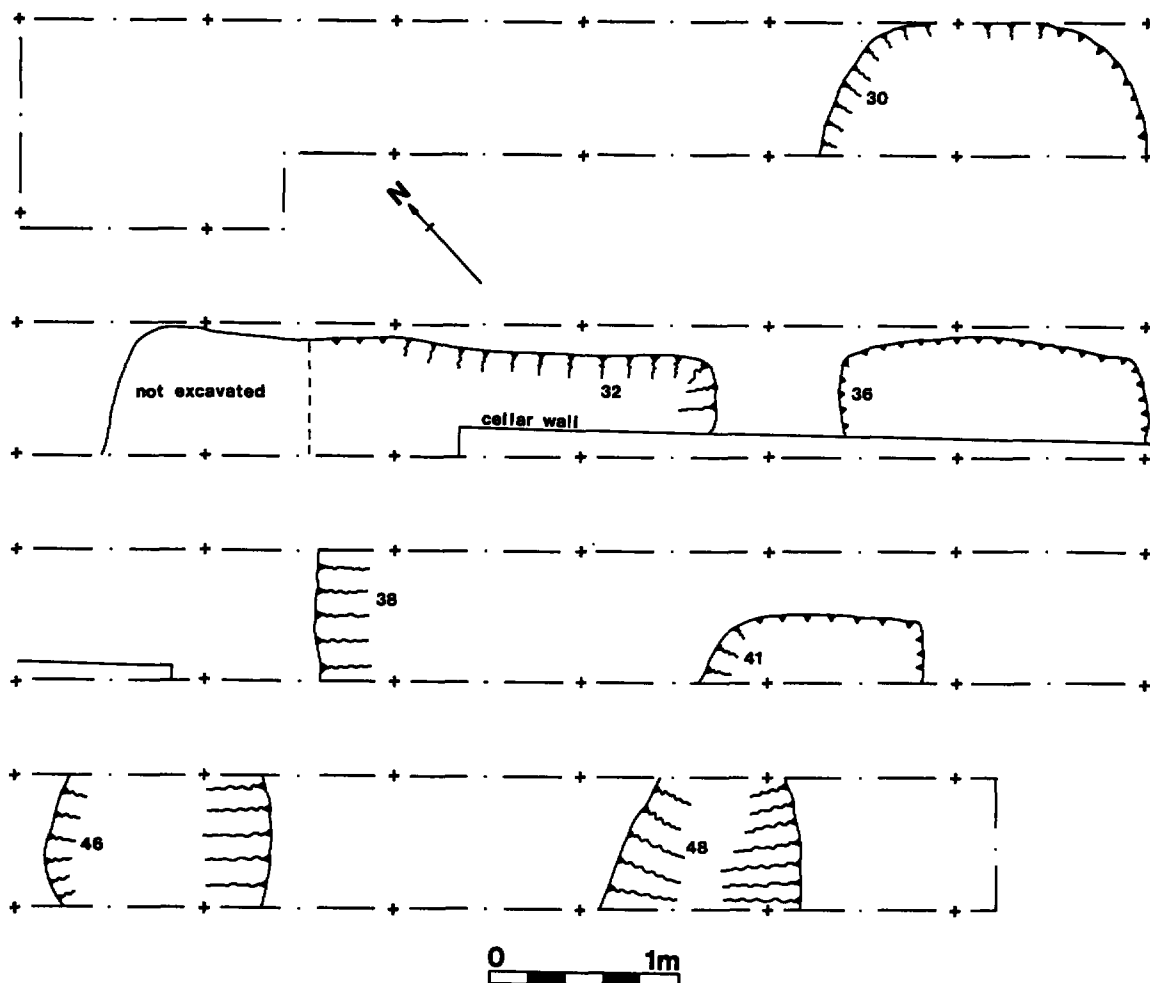


Fig. 4 37-39 High Street, Alton: plan of trench 3

Trench 4

Trench 4 was a narrow footing cut between trench 2 and 3. It ran approximately along the line of the street front of the property before turning through a right-angle to link up with trench 3 at the back of the property. Only those features cutting into chalk bedrock are discussed here. Layers above this tended to be disturbed by recent activity.

The description of the trench begins at the

southern end, moving north-eastwards along the street front before turning eastwards through a right-angle. The first feature cut into the chalk bedrock was a small stake-hole (64) about 0.08 m in diameter, and a few centimetres deep. This was at the far south end of the trench. It contained no datable finds. About 1 m NE was a much more substantial feature (52). This was interpreted as a large post-hole. It contained an olive-grey clay fill (5Y 5/2), with large flint and gravel nodules in the

bottom of the hole. This was interpreted as former packing for a substantial timber post. The fill also contained occasional pieces of clay roof tile. The hole was roughly sub-circular, with a diameter of between 0.50–0.55 m, and a depth of 0.44 m below bedrock. It was not possible to discover what level it had been cut from, as it was immediately overlain by a service pipe trench (05) which had removed any later archaeology. The bedrock was at a depth of about 0.7 m below the present ground level at this point. This depth was fairly consistent throughout the trench, although there were local variations in depth between 0.6 m and 0.75 m.

About a metre NE of 52 two further features were recorded cutting into bedrock. It was not possible to fully excavate either as they both extended beyond the edge of the trench. Feature 60 was cut 0.15 m into the bedrock, the excavated portion being 0.5 m by 0.45 m. The fill was an olive-grey clay similar to that found in feature 52. The only find was a small sherd of green-glazed Borderware pottery of the late medieval period, suggesting a 14th/15th century, or later, date. It was not known if this feature was a further post-hole or a linear feature extending into the street.

Immediately next to this feature was another cut (62). This appeared to be deeper than 60, although only a small part could be excavated because of its proximity to the eastern edge of the trench. The excavated portion was 0.55 m across and 0.17 m deep. The fill was heavily contaminated with roof tile fragments and oyster shell in its upper levels. It also contained large fragments of a coarseware bung-hole pitcher with a thumb-impressed base. The nature of the finds suggested that this was a rubbish pit, dated by its pottery content to the later medieval period.

A mortared stone wall (51) was encountered 0.35 m inside the right-angle turn of the trench. This was made up mainly of irregular ragstone blocks, with some flint and ironstone within. The stones were roughly faced to make straight edges on the outsides of the wall. This was 0.38 m thick, and 0.4 m high. It was immediately overlain by brick rubble levels. There were tentative traces of a narrow construction cut on the east side, although the stone seems to have been built flush

with any cut that may have existed on the west side. The wall was set on a thin (0.01 m) layer of sandy mortar, which overlay bedrock.

Once the stone wall and its bedding were removed, it was noted that there were three post-holes (54, 56, 58) immediately beneath it. Two of these were completely sealed, the most westerly only partly sealed. They were all approximately the same size, being sub-circular with diameters between 0.17 m and 0.22 m., and cut between 0.14 m and 0.17 m in bedrock. All had olive-grey clay fills (5Y 5/2). The only artefact recovered within them was a large piece of clay roof tile from the fill of feature 56.

To the east of the stone wall, the bedrock was covered by a thin burnt layer (87), containing much charcoal. This was cut through by a feature (66), the excavated portion being about 0.45 m wide, cutting into bedrock by about 0.16 m. The majority of this feature was beyond the NE baulk of the trench. About 0.1 m to the SW was a small stake hole (68) cutting into bedrock. This was about 0.08 m in diameter, and about the same deep. A number of similar small stake holes were excavated about a metre further to the SE (74, 76, 80), also cutting bedrock.

About 0.25 m south of 66 two further cut features, interpreted as post-holes, were found. Of these a larger square feature (70) was found to be cut by the smaller feature (72). The latter had a pointed bottom, indicating a modest sized sharpened stake had been contained within it. The former cut (70) had a level bottom suggesting a more substantial timber post. The dimensions of 70 were 0.22 m by 0.18 m by 0.14 m deep, those of 72 were about 0.12 m by 0.12 m by 0.3 m deep. Feature 70 contained clay tile fragments within a clay fill.

About 0.6 m SE of 70, a stone rubble wall (86) was encountered. This was fairly roughly made, using white clay as a bonding agent rather than mortar. The stones were mainly rough hewn ragstone lumps, some of large dimensions, but there were also nodules of flint present. The wall overlay a layer of clay tile, that, in turn, overlay a thin burnt charcoal layer (87). This in turn overlay a compacted brown clay containing some gravel stones (88). The latter was less than 0.05 m thick in most places. It overlay bedrock, and continued

throughout the rest of the trench excavated to the SE of wall 86.

On the removal of the wall and burnt layer 87, these were found to seal two moderately sized post-holes (78, 82) and a small stake-hole (80). Two further small stake-holes (74, 76) were found cutting bedrock just to the NW of wall 86. These features cut through burnt layer 87, whereas those sealed by the wall did not. About 0.3 m SE of the wall, another moderate-sized post-hole was found cutting bedrock (84). This latter hole did not seem to cut the burnt layer 87. None of these cut features contained any dating evidence.

The trench took a short right-angled turn about 0.5 m beyond wall 86. On the turn, two more cut features were found (91, 93). Feature 93 was an irregular cut, about 0.45 m by 0.45 m by 0.15 m deep. It contained a brown clay fill, but no datable artefacts. It cut through feature 91. This latter cut was only partly excavated, but it contained large quantities of charcoal mixed into a sticky silty clay. It contained a few sherds of medieval pottery.

The bedrock was largely devoid of cut features beyond this. The one shallow gully found (95) was not datable.

THE FINDS

Finds did not occur on this site in any great quantities. It was clearly apparent that there was a low presence of finds on most of the site. Even the later post-medieval overburden examined on the spoil heap was found to contain remarkably low quantities of earlier post-medieval finds for an urban site. This, taken together with evidence suggesting at least one large cess pit had been cleaned out at intervals, indicates that most of the domestic rubbish from this site was deposited off-site. Nevertheless, the finds that were made were often sufficient to provide an outline chronology for the site. These are described below.

Worked flint

Eight pieces of worked flint were found in otherwise undisturbed gravel deposits in trenches 9 and 10. These included two pieces of waste, two flakes,

a core, a side scraper, another possible side scraper, and a possible blade. The blade was possibly of Mesolithic date. The side scraper was a moderately well-made piece, being of possible late Neolithic date. The core showed evidence of random working, rather than the neat single-platform core characteristic of those struck for blades. The exact date could not be determined, other than that it was unlikely to have been of Mesolithic date. The crude flaking suggested a late Neolithic or Bronze Age date. The other pieces had no diagnostic features.

The haphazard nature of this assemblage, despite its small size, might suggest redeposition, possibly through the laying down of flood gravels. The stream bed of the upper Wey is less than 80 m NE of the site, and is not significantly higher than the river, making gravel deposition here a possibility.

Pottery

The pottery assemblage was small for an urban site (Table 2). There was a notable lack of pottery dating from the 17th and 18th centuries, suggesting that these levels may have been removed. There was also only a small quantity of pottery that could be dated to before the 13th century. The bulk of the finds were either late medieval (14th-early 16th century), or 19th century wares.

Pottery characteristic of the late medieval period included fragments of a bung-hole pitcher, late medieval jugs and pieces of 'Tudor Green' Borderwares (Surrey Whitewares). These dated from the later 14th century through to the 16th century. An insufficient number of pieces was recovered to make anything other than generalised statements. From what could be seen of the assemblage, it had many characteristics of finds made at Petersfield (Currie 1997b) and other sites on the Sussex/Hampshire borders, supplemented by wares from the Surrey/Hampshire borders.

Other finds

Details of other finds, none of which were of great significance, can be found in the site archive.

Table 2 Pottery fabric types, by number and weight

<i>Fabric (TF)</i>	<i>number of sherds</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>weight in gm</i>	<i>%</i>
TF1	18	51.4	625	72.3
TF2	2	5.7	60	6.9
TF3	1	2.9	10	1.2
TF4	1	2.9	1	0.1
TF5	3	8.6	25	2.9
TF6	4	11.4	9	1.0
TF7	1	2.9	15	1.7
TF8	1	2.9	10	1.2
TF9	1	2.9	10	1.2
TF10	1	2.9	15	1.7
TF11	1	2.9	10	1.2
TF12	1	2.9	75	8.7
Total	35		865 gm	

Key to type fabrics (TF)

TF1: moderately coarse sandy fabric, occasional crushed stone, occasional haematite; medieval

TF2: flint-tempered coarseware containing abundant crushed flint; medieval

TF3: coarse sandy fabric, moderate crushed stone, occasional haematite; similar to TF1 but coarser; medieval

TF4: fine sandy fabric; medieval

TF5: coarse Borderware; moderately sandy white fabric with occasional red haematite; 13th/14th century

TF6: 'Tudor Green'/Borderware; fine white sandy fabric with thick green glaze; 15th/early 16th century

TF7: fine sandy fabric with occasional black haematite; medieval

TF8: very fine sandy fabric, occasional haematite, moderate mica; late medieval?

TF9: tin-glazed earthenware; post-medieval, 17th century-c. 1760

TF10: glazed post-medieval oxidised earthenware; 16th-19th century

TF11: salt-glazed earthenware; c. 1720-80

TF12: unglazed post-medieval oxidised earthenware; 16th-19th century?

DISCUSSION

The archaeological evidence recovered from this exercise was useful in increasing our knowledge, both of one of its oldest documented buildings, and of the medieval town of Alton in general. Trenches 1 and 3 produced pits excavated into the chalk bedrock that are typical of burgrave plots in medieval towns. There were also pits that could be designated as 'rubbish' pits in trench 4 (features 62

and 93). It is slightly unusual that only feature 62 showed any indications of containing the usual heavy concentrations of discarded artefacts expected from these features. A large rock cut pit (24) in trench 1 was particularly devoid of rubbish, particularly bone, although two large sherds of a 13th/14th century jug suggested a date for the feature.

Of the other pit-like features, those that were found in trench 3 were the most interesting. These

comprised a series of what appear to have been large cess pits. They all seemed to have respected the property boundary between 35 and 37 High Street, suggesting that this is at least as old as the oldest pit. Dating materials were not exceptional from these pits. Feature 30 seemed to be particularly devoid of the domestic rubbish often found in cess pits, although others, such as feature 41, made some amends. This latter feature, probably one of the older pits, was dated to the 12th-14th century, and was noted to contain some preserved seed and small bone within its wet silty clay fill.

It was notable that none of the pits cut into one another, suggesting a systematic disposal of cess over a long period of time. Feature 32 contained some tentative evidence that the cess was cleaned out at regular intervals. The lower levels seemed to contain late medieval pottery, whilst those above contained wares from the 17th/early 18th century. However, this statement must be considered with caution as the circumstances of the excavation only allowed the pits to be rapidly sampled, and more careful examination might not have supported these preliminary findings.

The most interesting evidence from this excavation came from trench 4, and was concerned with structural evidence for medieval building on the site. This evidence was most enigmatic. The stone wall (51) found near the street front can probably be interpreted as the front wall that gave the property its medieval name, 'Stonehouse'. As this name is known from at least 1311, it is possible that this feature can be attributed to a pre-1311 date. The cruder stone wall (86) just over 2m behind would appear to be later. This is based on the fact that there was a burnt layer (87) beneath 86 that seemed to stop short of 51, and did not appear to extend beyond it.

However, dating evidence was found below wall 51 that is not easy to reconcile with a pre-1311 date. Post-holes were found sealed beneath this wall. Taken in conjunction with other substantial post-holes, such as feature 52, this would suggest that a timber building existed before the stone house was erected. One of the sealed post-holes (56) beneath the wall 51 contained a large fragment of clay roof tile. This might suggest that clay tile roofs existed in Alton before the stone house was built. It is possible that the timber building

indicated by the numerous post-holes found in trench 4 was the building that had the tile roof. There is further evidence of tile roofing in the layer immediately overlaying the burnt layer 87. These underlie the second wall 86, suggesting that there had been a fire on the site that had caused a tile roof to collapse onto the underlying floor. That this burnt layer did not extend beyond the line of wall 51 might suggest that this burning episode was contemporary with the existence of a medieval stone house. However, the existence of a large sealed tile fragment under this wall also suggests a tile roof before 1311.

This is not impossible, but it can only be fitted within our chronology of clay tile roofs in Hampshire with careful deliberation. Hare (1991, 88) considers that little is known about clay tile production before the first quarter of the 14th century. Before this shingles and thatch was probably the main roofing material beyond the coastal regions of Hampshire, where West Country slate is known to have been imported in the 12th century. For earlier indications of clay roof tiles, Hare (*ibid*) tells us we are reliant on archaeological material. This suggests that the industry was being established in the 13th century, where it first seems to have settled in the north of the county. Highclere, the bishop of Winchester's manor, appears to have been using tiles from at least 1268, with tile production taking place at Odiham between 1275 and 1280. Further afield tiles are known from Clarendon in South Wiltshire before 1244, and an excavated kiln in Surrey gave a thermo-remnant magnetism date of 1235 ± 15 (*ibid*, 88-89).

It would now seem that to this we can add Alton to the early tile sites in Hampshire if the stone wall (51) can be accepted as being built before 1311. Unfortunately, there is no other archaeological evidence to support this. On present evidence, we might assume a date of before 1311 for the stone wall on documentary evidence alone, but this could be revised later if further work is done on this property. If this is the case, it would seem likely that the timber building with the conjectured tile roof was probably of 13th-century date. The earliest cess pits in the backland of the property suggest occupation from the 12th/13th century, and pottery from elsewhere on the site

seems to support the existence of a pre-1311 building there.

The evidence suggests a pre-stone timber building existed. This was rebuilt in stone at some time before 1311. There was a fire, suggested by level 87, but it is uncertain if this post-dated the stone house or not. All that can be said is that the burning does not extend beyond the wall, nor is there any evidence for it in the post-holes thought to pre-date the wall. Over the layer containing evidence for this fire, a layer of clay roof tiles was deposited, and a second stone wall was built 2.1 m behind the original wall. This may have been an internal partition, but its date is uncertain. At least some of the stake-holes, such as 74 and 76, seem to have been within the stone building.

Beyond this there is little further to be said with any certainty. The cess pits in the backyard do not seem to date beyond the middle of the 18th century. Some of them have been cut through by later cellars, suggesting that cellaring here began from the 18th century onwards. Numerous brick walls were observed fairly high up in the archaeological stratigraphy, suggesting a gradual conversion to the present structure from the later 18th century. The exact date that the stone house was destroyed is not known, but the reuse of ragstone blocks over a sewer pipe in trench 1 might suggest that there was old material still around for reuse then. It is possible that the last remnants of the medieval building above ground were not removed until the later 19th century, although this must remain conjectural until further evidence is forthcoming.

CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological excavations revealed evidence for three phases of building, all possibly from the medieval period. A stone wall found close to the street front was thought to be associated with a

building recorded in 1311 as the 'Stonehouse'. Three post-holes were found sealed beneath this wall. These, and other post-holes found nearby, were thought to be part of an earlier timber structure. One of the sealed post-holes contained a large fragment of a clay roof tile, suggesting that the earlier timber building had a roof of these materials.

Clay roof tiles are generally considered to be common in Hampshire only from the 14th century onwards. A possible pre-1311 date for a tiled building suggests that the earlier building on this site was of relatively high status. This status seems to continue into the later medieval period when the earlier building was rebuilt in stone, an unusual material for a house in a small market town.

At the back of the property a series of cess pits was found that clearly respect the property boundary between 35 and 37 High Street. The earliest of these dated from the 12th–14th centuries, thereby suggesting that the boundary is at least that old. From the 18th century cellaring began on the property, destroying some of the earlier post-medieval evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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