

PLAYSTREET EXCAVATION RESULTS

September 2008

THE HISTORY OF PLAYSTREET



The site at Playstreet came to light in 1977 through aerial photographs taken by Mick Aston (Time Team archaeologist). The photographs seem to show the extensive remains of a deserted medieval settlement. The soilmarks include what appears to be a street, with building plots lying along the southern edge.

This 'street' forms the southern edge of a triangular shaped green, the presence of which is confirmed in a statement made by Thomas Coleman of Bickenhall in 1658. He describes how all the stray stock from the common land in the Forest of Neroche would be rounded up and driven to 'Plaistreet Green' for collection. The stock were kept on the green for one hour before being driven to Bickenhall Pound. This green is also clearly shown on the Bickenhall parish map of 1823.

Documentary evidence suggests that Playstreet was in existence by the early medieval period. References exist that describe how a place called Playstreet was given by the Manor of Thurlbear to Taunton Priory. Robert Count of Mortain owned the Manor of Thurlbear. Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-1540) Playstreet fell into the hands of a number private owners; latterly in 1602 this included Rachel Portman (daughter of Sir Henry Portman). At the time the building is described as having two chambers with a little orchard outside the kitchen door. No mention is made of any other buildings or the rest of the settlement. On her death in 1631 Playstreet became part of the Portman estate.

The settlement at Playstreet lies some 200m from the former northern boundary of the Forest of Neroche, which once followed the course of the stream to the south. It also lies on the eastern edge of a former deer park (the Small Park), which was located at Park Farm. The deer park, which may be 13th century in date, went out of use sometime during the mid 16th century.

The remains of the settlement at Playstreet are now divided in half by the new road, which leads from Curland. The eastern half of the site is arable land and has therefore been heavily ploughed over the years. Slight earthworks associated with a former trackway survive in the pasture field to the west.

The watercolours

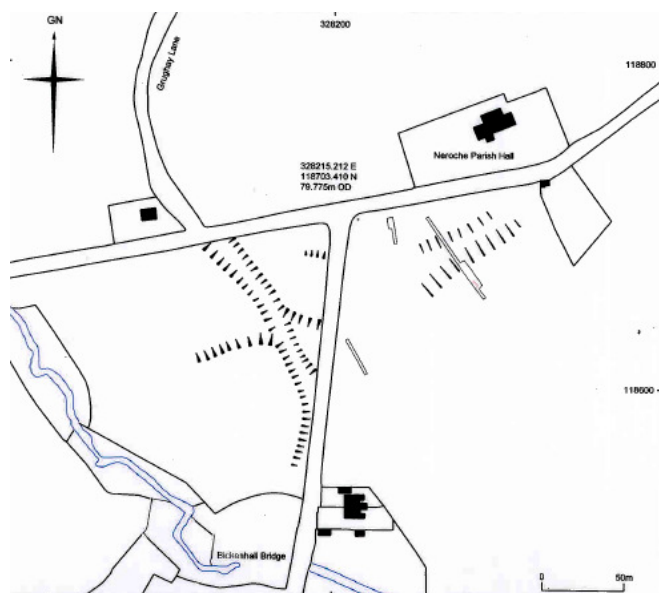
We had thought that these buildings may be all that remained of Rachel Portman's house. Two



watercolours that date from this period show views of Plaistreet Farm from the north and east. If you look carefully at the details in these pictures you can make out the remains of stone windows surrounding the windows. These stone mullions are rather grand for such a building; they may therefore have been salvaged from the remains of Rachel Portman's house. Tantalising traces of such ruins are shown on these watercolours suggesting that this building may once have been part of a much grander building.

THE EARTHWORKS AT PLAYSTREET *by Hazel Riley*

Back in the 1970s, Mick Aston discovered earthworks and soilmarks (light and dark patches of soil) on photographs of the fields to the south of Neroche Parish Hall. He interpreted these marks as being the remains of the medieval settlement of Playstreet. The earthworks survived in the field to the east of the modern road to Curland, while to the west of the road the remains showed up as soilmarks.



Since 1977 the field containing the earthworks has been ploughed, but slight traces of the earthworks survive and these were surveyed by Hazel Riley (English Heritage) and members of the Neroche Local History Group in August 2008.

A differential GPS (Global Positioning System survey equipment) was used to record the tops and bottoms of the humps and bumps in the field. The earthworks found can be related directly to the Bickenhall parish map of 1823, which shows that Grughay Lane used to continue all the way down to Bickenhall Bridge.

If you look at the earthwork survey plan you will see a deep hollow, which runs across the NE corner of the field; this is the continuation of this ancient lane. To the west, a scarp marks the position of an old boundary between two fields and to the east an indistinct platform shows part of the old enclosure; this once contained the house shown at Plaistreet on the 1823 map – the site of Rachel Portman’s house.

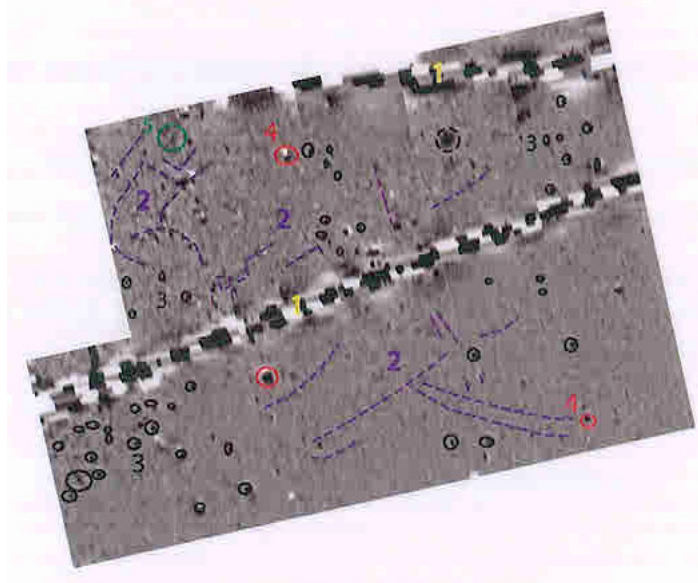
PLAYSTREET: GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY *by Penny Cunningham*

Archaeological geophysical survey

Geophysical survey is a non-destructive method of revealing buried remains. The main geophysical method used to find archaeology is magnetometry. This method measures slight changes in the earth’s magnetic field which are created by buried archaeological features such as ditches, pits, ovens, hearth, burnt areas and kilns.

Although geophysics cannot be used to date features, the shapes of some features can often suggest which period they belong to.

Playstreet



The survey area at Playstreet was based around the former route of the medieval road, with the aim of the survey being to identify further information about the settlement remains suggested on Mick Aston’s air photographs and found during the excavation in 2008. Sadly however the soils did not ‘respond’ to the magnetometer (possibly a result of the waterlogged conditions) and we did not get the sorts of results expected. This ‘picture’ was further distorted by the presence of two modern pipelines (see on the plan), which further masked any nearby archaeological remains.

We did however get some evidence of the medieval archaeology. This includes the faint lines running both east-west and north-south (see 2 on the plan). These are probably ditches.

Other probable medieval features include a number of possible pits and some areas of burning (see 3 & 4 on the plan). These areas of burning may be associated with ironworking which we now know was being undertaken on the site during the medieval period. In the north-west corner of the survey there is a faint circular feature (see 5 on the plan). The origins of this feature remain unknown.

The future?

Ideally we would like to do more geophysical survey in this field. We know that there is a considerable amount of archaeology here and further survey work would help us understand more about the lay out of the settlement. There are a variety of types of geophysical survey

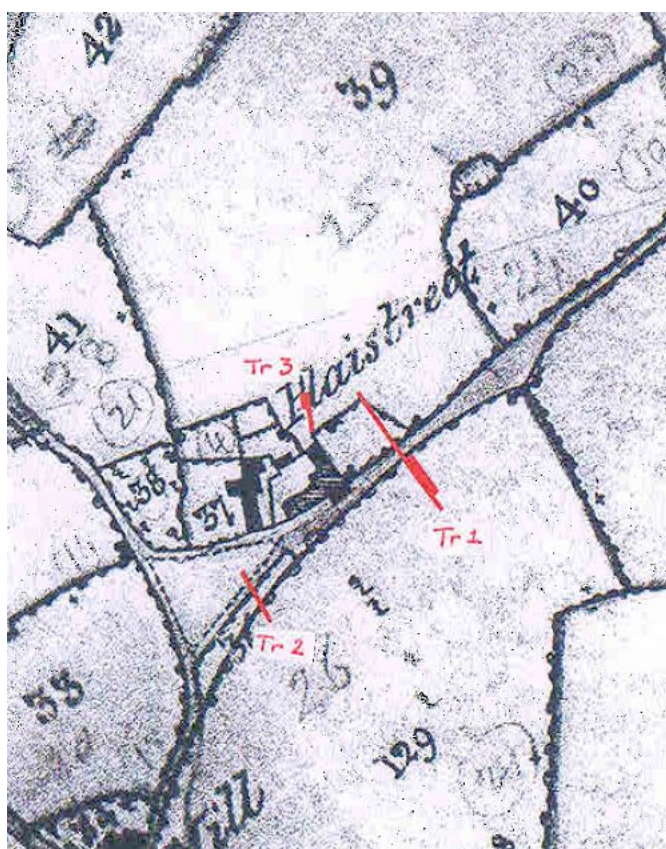
available and it is possible that a Resistivity Survey may be more appropriate in this context. Resistivity works by passing an electric current between two nodes. These 'nodes' are placed in the ground and the meter reads the resistance (i.e. the time it takes to pass an electrical current between the two points). Resistivity is very good at identifying large pits, sunken features (buildings), large ditches, roads/tracks, building trenches, and brick/masonry foundations.

PLAYSTREET: TRENCH 1

The location of the trench was intended to help investigate the holloway and the possible building platforms.

The Results

The Trench 1 excavation results may be broadly divided into the following three groups - the holloway, structural evidence and a possible industrial area.



The holloway

The holloway was identified in the central area of the trench. Possible traces of the road surface and even traces of former hedge banks (which may once have bordered the road) seem to have survived on the very eastern and western edges of the trackway. Unfortunately the main part of the track had been heavily disturbed by a modern water pipe that follows the course of the former road (see also the geophysical survey results). Finds from this feature include tap slag, smithing waste and pottery of an 11th-15th century date. The presence of tap slag is interesting as such waste was commonly used to surface trackways on the Blackdown Hills.

Structural evidence

A group of features thought to represent the remains of walls were identified to the south of the holloway. Although these features had been very disturbed by later agricultural activity, their surviving appearance (i.e. a random collection of chert nodules and limestone rubble in shallow foundation trenches) suggests the presence of some sort of wall-like structures that were probably of a cob or dry stone construction. Such cob building techniques would traditionally be expected in such a settlement as this during this period. The absence of any domestic features such as hearths in this area has led us to believe that these 'walls' may define different outdoor yard areas. The shape of the trench and the short duration of the excavation has meant that we have not been fully able to understand each individual feature.

The structural features

The first group of structural features you encounter as you travel south down the trench are two linear features. Broadly aligned NE-SW, they converge together at the western edge of the trench and probably represent the remains of a narrow gully and a wall. Finds recovered from this feature include pottery, which ranges in date from the early 11th – 15th century. A small amount of tap slag was also found.

The next structural feature to the south is probably the remains of one wall, which runs across the trench E-W. Although this feature produced pottery of an 11th–15th century date, the majority was of an early medieval date. Smithing waste was also recovered.

The last group of features that form part of this group include another probable wall and a post hole. Finds again included pottery of an 11th-15th century date.

Possible industrial area

A large shallow circular feature located at the very southern end of the trench is thought to be the remains of an industrial feature. This feature was made up of a very dense layer of burnt chert fragments, which had been deliberately packed into the clay layer beneath to create a surface. A similar ‘patch’ of this material was found to the north. Finds from these features include fragments of pottery, which range in date from the 11th – 15th centuries. Although no ironworking waste was found in association with these features, it has been suggested that these features could represent the remains of an iron ore roasting site.



This ‘industrial’ feature appears to have ‘cut’ two ditches. One ditch contained pottery exclusively of an early medieval date, which makes it the earliest feature in this complex. It is possible that this shallow feature relates to the initial establishment of the site.

Other features, in this area include a probable collapsed wall and a ditch. The wall collapse contained pottery, which ranged in date from the 11th – 15th centuries.

PLAYSTREET: TRENCH 2

Trench 2 was located with the intention of investigating the holloway and the possible traces of building platforms shown on Mick Aston’s sketch transcription from the air photograph. The location of this trench was successful; the holloway was identified and we even found traces of the former surface. Sadly we did not have time to further investigate this trench so we do not know how deep the holloway deposits survive. Very few finds were recovered from this trench.

PLAYSTREET: TRENCH 3

Trench 3 was located in the NW corner of the field. Its location was originally designed to investigate the small group of buildings shown on the Bickenhall parish map of 1823 as 'Plaistreet.' However as the following results and plans show we were way off the mark! The trench it turns out was actually located across the corner of two small plots of land lying to the rear of these buildings, with the main concentration of buildings lying much more in the centre of the field and possibly under the modern road (see the map extract and plan).



Results

The excavation of Trench 3 revealed a sequence of layers (what archaeologists call deposits) in the SW corner of the main excavation area. Although we are not quite sure what these layers relate too (i.e. are they the infill of a feature) the dating evidence recovered suggests they are all of a medieval date.

A total of four archaeological features were also identified. These include two pits, a ditch and a possible structural feature, which were located

further to the south in the extension area of the trench. The pottery recovered from the structural feature was in large, unworn pieces and also contained lots of limestone rubble. This has led us to believe that our trench had frustratingly caught the edge of some much larger structure.

The two pits contained medieval pottery, which ranged in date from 11th-15th century. Tap slag was also found both pits. The majority of pottery from the ditch was medieval although a few post medieval pot sherds were also found. It also produced an amount of tap slag, smithing slag and furnace like material. This may be of some significance as large quantities of oven bricks which may be of a 17th century date were recovered from this ditch. In summary, evidence for ironworking in the early medieval period clearly extends down the slope.

Other features of note in this area include the two brick rubble spreads, which were first identified when the trench was initially excavated. Originally thought to represent brick foundations, these features later turned out to be brick rubble spreads, possibly being associated with the levelling of a post medieval building in the area.

PLAYSTREET: ANIMAL BONE *by L. Higbee*



A small quantity of animal bone was recovered from the excavation. Most of the bones and teeth are from livestock species including cattle, sheep and pigs. These animals would have been exploited for a range of uses and commodities.

Cattle & Sheep

Cattle provide both meat and milk, and before the advent of the plough horse, they were also used to plough and manure arable fields. Although sheep similarly provided meat and milk, during the medieval period they were primarily managed for wool - an important economic product at the time. The export of wool from ports such as Plymouth in Devon generated a vast amount of England's wealth throughout the medieval period.

Pigs

Pigs provide no secondary products (i.e. milk and wool) and are generally culled at an earlier age than other livestock animals. It is likely that the villagers at Playstreet had commoners' rights to graze their pigs within the Forest of Neroche during the autumn. Autumn was the most favourable time because the pigs could eat the glut of fallen acorns, which are a health hazard to cattle and horses. The right to graze pigs is known as *pannage*. The pork produced during this time of year would probably have been preserved by salting and eaten over the winter months.

Horse & Deer

Single bones from a horse and a red deer were also identified amongst the recovered remains. During the medieval period deer hunting was a privilege reserved for the wealthy upper classes. Lower-status hunt-servants or yeomen assisted with hunts and were entitled to a share of the venison. According to the *Tretyse off Huntying* (a medieval document), deer carcasses were skinned, disembowelled and butchered in a ceremonial fashion, and following this 'unmaking' ritual certain parts of the carcass were gifted to particular individuals based on their social status and role. The right shoulder would have gone to the best hunter of the deer, and this is precisely the venison cut represented in the Playstreet material.

The presence of red deer is interesting as the Forest of Neroche is thought to have been stocked with fallow deer. Red deer preferred less cultivated areas such as Exmoor, while roe deer were excluded from the country after 1338 as they were thought to frighten off other deer!

Why were deer so important?

Medieval kings needed a guaranteed supply of venison for domestic consumption, for feast day banquets (and there were many of these), hunting - both for personal recreation and guest entertainment) and for gifts - either as venison or as gifts of live animals to stock parks.

Venison was the '*high status aristocratic diet reserved for the upper classes.... Venison was not for sale on the open market but poachers did supply the black market.*'

PLAYSTREET: STONE OBJECTS



The Quernstone

A large fragment of a quern stone was found in Trench 1. This is probably part of a base stone. It is well worn with most of the ridges now almost flat. The material is a hard stone yet to be identified.

The Whetstones

Fragments of several whetstones were recovered from the site and they range in size from a fine stone suitable for a small knife up to a large rectangular stone the type used to sharpen a scythe or sickle.

PLAYSTREET: CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIALS

The excavations revealed evidence of a range of brick fragments from small slivers through to complete bricks. Brick is not found in medieval rural contexts in Somerset and the earliest material found here appears to date from the 17th century. This distinctive type is a small hand-made brick of the style used to line an oven or kiln type structure. Much of the material recovered from the site was found in large ditch in Trench 3.

Other bricks from the site include a large fragment of an unusual hand-made brick larger than modern bricks and probably used as partition wall inside a building.

One of the more interesting finds from a ditch in Trench 3 was a large deposit of well-fired clay fragments or daub with finger impressions clearly visible on numerous pieces. This daub probably came from a clay structure that had burnt down and then been thrown into the ditch.

A small sample of late 19th and early 20th century roof tile fragments were found unstratified across the site.

PLAYSTREET: IRONWORKING WASTE *by Marc Cox*

The slag recovered from Trenches 1 and 3 has provided us with clear evidence for the presence of a mixed, small-scale (cottage industry) industrial ironworking site at Playstreet where both smelting and smithing seem to have been taking place. The main types of iron working waste include tap slag (produced as a by-product during the smelting process) and iron smithing waste (created during the process of working smithing the processed iron ore). This is particularly significant as Bickenhall is recorded in the Domesday Book (1086) as paying part of its rent to the Manor at Curry Rivel in blooms of iron. A bloom is the product created by the initial smelting process. Blooms are forged by smithing into wrought iron.



Iron ore occurs naturally on the Blackdown Hills as deposits of Siderite (iron nodules) within the greensand deposits. These deposits have been exploited since the latter prehistoric period.

Trench 1

Ironworking waste was recovered from three principal areas in Trench 1. Both smelting (tap slag) and smithing waste was recovered from the very NW end of the trench, while more tap slag, some heavily vitrified, burnt material and smithing waste were all found in the holloway. This may be very significant as traditionally in the Blackdown Hills, slag was often used to surface trackways.

Further ironworking waste finds (including tap slag and smithing waste) were recovered from two ditches, which lie within the main area of the trench containing probable structural evidence (see Trench 1 plan). Both these features contained medieval pottery, which ranged in date from 12th – 15th centuries. This is very important as we now have some indication of the period over which these ironworking activities were occurring.

Trench 3

Iron working waste was recovered from three of the four features in Trench 3. Tap slag and furnace-like material were all recovered from the broad shallow ditch like features at the very end of the trench, while tap slag was also recovered from. All three features contained pottery of a medieval and post medieval date. So again we have evidence of iron smelting occurring in features now known to contain pottery of a 12th-15th date. Clinker (the ash from coal usage) was also recovered from this trench.

PLAYSTREET: POTTERY by *Alejandra Gutiérrez*



The vast majority of the pottery recovered is of medieval date (97% of all the sherds) but a handful of post-medieval (2%) and modern (1%) wares and even Roman wares were also identified. Much of the pottery is very fragmented suggesting that many of the archaeological features have been heavily disturbed by later agricultural activity.

The Roman Pottery

A few pieces of Roman pottery were recovered from a number of the medieval features in both trenches. Although the presence of these pieces in association with early medieval is intriguing, such a small assemblage is normally considered by archaeologists to be ‘residual.’ This means that they are probably ‘left-overs’ from some other activity. In this case it could be from the manuring of this land during the Roman period. Rubbish from rural settlements was commonly used to help fertilize fields in the Roman and medieval periods.

The Medieval Pottery (1050-1500 AD)

The majority of the medieval pottery was recovered from Trench 1. The ‘types’ of pottery recovered include both wheel-thrown and hand-made coarse wares (i.e. simple rustic pottery); all are local in origin. The absence of any fine wares shows just what a poor settlement this was!

The most common type of pottery found was ‘South Somerset’ hand made jars which are finished on a turntable. These jars tend to be of a late 11th –13th century date. The presence of such early material is very significant as we now have evidence for activity at Playstreet in the period immediately following the Norman Conquest, suggesting that the village was established around this date on the edge of the newly created Forest of Neroche. It is during this period that the motte and bailey at Castle Neroche was also undergoing construction under the auspices of William the Conqueror’s half brother, Robert Count of Mortain.

South Somerset wares have been identified across the south-west, with pieces being found as far west as Launceston. Despite the wide distribution of this type of pottery, the place of its manufacture is still unknown, although recent work has suggested that it may have its origins in the Blackdown Hills. The site(s) of these pottery kilns remain to be identified.

The other main type of medieval pottery sherds recovered includes Early and Later South Somerset glazed wares. This assemblage (pottery collection) includes fragments of green glazed tripod pitchers (a type of three legged vessel), which are of 12th century date. Ham Green wares

from Bristol are also present. These include fragments of hand-made jars and green glazed jugs, which are of a 12th – 13th century date.

Mary's Pot

Located between walls, Mary's pot was group of pottery sherds, which were found embedded into a layer of greeney-brown clay. This collection of pottery did not seem to be sitting within a feature (i.e. a pit or ditch). All the pottery sherds were large and unworn which suggests that the vessel had not been moved around much within the soil. This has lead us to believe that the pot collapsed and became embedded into the ground quite literally where it was left.

Analysis of this pottery has shown that it is an early (11th-12th century) South Somerset coarseware jar, with part of the rim still surviving. It would have been hand made and finished off on a turntable.

Post Medieval Pottery (1550-1800)

The assemblage of post-medieval and modern pottery is very small, amounting to just to 71 sherds. The collection includes wheel thrown South Somerset glazed wares, slipwares from Bristol and /or Staffordshire, mottled wares (from Staffordshire/Bristol/Derby), and Nottingham/Derbyshire-type stoneware and Frechen stoneware.

A BIG THANK YOU!

The Playstreet excavation was run over a two-week period in late September 2008. During this period we had some 40 volunteers and over 200 visitors per day. The support we received from the local population was invaluable and on behalf of the Neroche Scheme we would like to say a 'big thank you' to everyone who participated.

