



EXCAVATIONS AT KING STREET, MAIDSTONE, KENT

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Excavations at King Street, Maidstone, Kent

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Summary

Excavations by MOLA in 2006 at King Street, Maidstone, found evidence for buildings fronting the road from the 13th century onwards.

Introduction

The site was a rectangular plot on the south side of King Street, Maidstone, Kent, bounded to the east by Pad's Hill and to the south and west by the Chequers Centre complex (Fig 1). An archaeological evaluation, carried out in July 2006, found that archaeological survival was confined to the northern part of the site. Elsewhere, archaeological deposits had been completely truncated, probably during earlier redevelopment of the site. Consequently, the excavation undertaken in September 2006 (Fig 2) focused on the northern side of the site adjacent to King Street. Modern pavement level on King Street is 18.91m OD but the site dropped away to the south, in part reflecting the natural slope towards the River Len. The approximate centre of the excavation areas is at NGR 576330 155745.

All phases of archaeological work were undertaken by Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA). The archaeological sequence was excavated using a single context system. Within this report, archaeological context numbers are denoted [1] etc. All stratigraphic and specialist data were recorded using standard MOLA procedures and subsequently entered into an Oracle database. The pottery is recorded using Canterbury Archaeological Trust (CAT) codes. The digital and physical site archive (site code KT-CHE06) remains with MOLA awaiting deposition with the appropriate local repository.

Medieval Maidstone

Maidstone is first documented in the Kent Domesday Survey of 1086, as a large, rural manor belonging to the Archbishop of Canterbury. It had been a place of some importance in the late Anglo-Saxon period as the site of a rural minster (Lawson and Killingray 2004, 33, 41). The centre of the post-Conquest village was probably near the parish church (rebuilt as All Saints by Archbishop Courtenay in 1395) which lay immediately south of the confluence of the River Len and the Medway.

It is likely that the archbishop had re-founded Maidstone as a town by the beginning of the 13th century, but the exact date is not known. The first documentary evidence for Maidstone as an urban community is provided by a royal charter of 1261. The town was laid out on a grid of streets on the higher ground to the north of the River Len. Its main north–south axis, Week Street and Gabriel's Hill, more or less followed the line of the old Roman road from Rochester to Lympe. To the west of this line, St Faith's Street, Earl Street and High Street ran off at right-angles towards the Medway. King Street continued the line of the High Street eastwards (Clark and Murfin 1995, 22).



Figure 1: Site location

The earliest buildings on the site

The earliest archaeological remains found on the site consist of a series of internal surfaces and walls belonging to three distinct properties, Buildings 1–3, fronting on to the south side of King Street. These buildings, which probably date to the 13th century, were situated on the edge of the historic core of the archbishop's town, on high ground above the River Len. Planned medieval towns were carefully laid out. The burgage plots laid out for building would include a length of street frontage and a greater depth of land stretching back from it. Studies have demonstrated the importance of the unit of the statute perch (16.5 ft/5.03m) within this laying out process. Original plot sizes of 3–3.5 x 10–12 perches have been determined in some cases (Slater 1981, 212).

Plots were, however, often subject to later division, both lengthways and, if there was access to the rear, widthways, though the original plot boundaries usually remained discernable in some form, partly because of the inherent difficulty of moving boundaries within a close-built urban environment and partly because burgage plots had a legal status within the town. Similarly, the merging of plots, although possible, was not frequent until the 19th century (Slater, 1981 211).

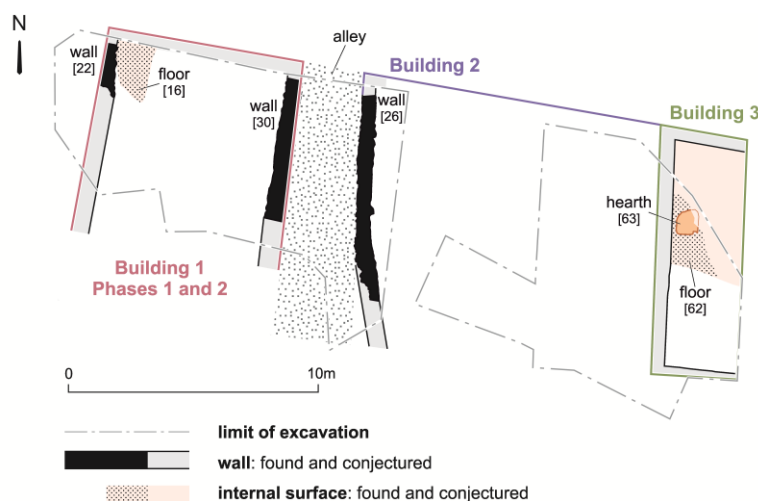


Figure 2: The principal medieval features of the site

The archaeological evidence for Buildings 1–3, although fragmentary, does provide some confirmation that the statute perch was likely to have been the most important unit used in laying out the new plots in Maidstone. For example, the external wall lines of the westernmost building found on site, Building 1, were defined by two north–south aligned ragstone and lime mortar foundations ([22]; [30]) which were c 7.95m (26 feet or c 1.5 perches) apart. Early floor surfaces, one ([16]) containing pottery dated to 1000–1225, survived at c 17.75m OD in the northwest of the site, but their relationship with the wall footings was not always clear.

Sampling of these Building 1 floors (samples {1} from [16]; {2} from [32]) produced small quantities of charred plant remains including grains of free threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum/turgidum*) and oats (*Avena* sp.), several wheat and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) chaff fragments and a number of seeds from common cornfield weeds. Though both assemblages were small, that from sample {1} consisted mainly of oat grains with relatively few chaff fragments or weeds, suggesting that it contained clean grain, probably spilled during food preparation in the building. In sample {2} the cereal grains were outnumbered by crop processing waste, suggestive of burnt fuel residues from a hearth. Fragments of common/flat oyster *Ostrea edulis* shell, cod and herring were present together with three fragments of sheep-sized long bone, one of which was calcined – indicating a combustion temperature of at least 700° Celsius (Lyman 1994, 386).

These surfaces were sealed by a clayey dump ([14]), which ran up to wall [22] and appeared to be contemporary with its construction. Pottery from this dump included fragments from Tyler Hill, Canterbury (CAT pottery code CM1) and a more local, Maidstone, source (CM4), and provides a date of 1225–1375. Building 1 may

therefore be of two phases, the earliest represented by floors in use c 1225 or earlier, the later by walls built c 1225 or later.

An alley way, c 2.5m wide (c 8 feet 3 inches or 0.5 perch), is presumed to have separated Building 1 from its eastern neighbour Building 2, though no alley surfaces had survived later activity. It would have led to the yards at the rear of the buildings. Little of Building 2 survived, apart from the mortared ragstone footings of its western external wall ([26]).

The easternmost building recorded during the excavation was Building 3. As it continued beyond the eastern limit of excavation, the full dimensions of Building 3 are not known. None of its wall survived but their alignment can be determined from those of Building 5 which replaced it. Its extant remains consisted of trampled floors, postholes and a hearth in the front part of the building, close to King Street. The hearth ([63]) was built from a ragstone slab with vertically-set pegtiles placed around its edges. The tiles, with two round nail holes and areas of brown glaze, date to 1200–1500. The occupation deposits around the hearth ([62]), which lay at 17.90m OD, included slag and daub fragments and a fragmented and abraded shelly-ware jar (CAT pottery code CEM2) dated to 1000–1225: obviously, in this context a date close to the end of this range is likely.

An environmental sample (sample {3}) taken from floor [62] contained over 50 charred grains of free-threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum/turgidum*) found in a sample from occupation layer [62]{3}, surrounding a hearth. A few oat (*Avena* sp.), rye (*Secale cereale*) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) grains were also present, as were several cereal rachis fragments and a number of charred weed seeds which may represent burnt fuel from the hearth. The grains may have been accidentally burnt during food preparation. Several charred fragments of hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*) shell and a number of pulses, their size and shape resembling peas (*Pisum sativum*), would also have come from foods prepared or consumed in the building. Further evidence for diet was provided by small groups of marine/estuarine molluscs (common periwinkle *Littorina littorea*, common mussel *Mytilus edulis*, common/flat oyster *Ostrea edulis* and common cockle *Cerastoderma edule*) and fish (smelt *Osmerus eperlanus*; the cod (family) Gadidae, whiting *Merlangius merlangus* and haddock *Melanogrammus aeglefinus*, herring (family) Clupeidae and gurnard Triglididae. In addition, there was a single bone from a plaice *Pleuronectes platessa*. All these species, both mollusc and fish, inhabit the Kent coastal waters and the outer estuaries of the Thames and Medway. Smelt ascend rivers during winter to breed in freshwater in spring (Wheeler 1978, 90) and were, for example, taken in large quantities in the upper tidal Thames at Hammersmith, Wandsworth and Putney until at least the end of the eighteenth century (Wheeler 1979, 48-9). The sample also indicated the consumption of beef and lamb.

Because of poor survival over the centre of the site, it is unclear whether Building 2 extended as far east as Building 3. Had it done so, it would have occupied a plot 12.5m (or 2.5 perches) wide.

Tudor Maidstone

In the early 1540s, the antiquarian John Leland recorded that Maidstone was a market town 'of one long street, well built and full of inns' (Russell 1881, 217). In 1549 the town received its royal charter, which established a municipal government of an elected mayor, twelve jurors and twenty-four freeholders, as well as sanctioning arrangements for courts, markets, fairs and the establishment of a new grammar school (Clark and Murfin 1995, 56). The charter may have stimulated further economic growth, though John Leland's observations could suggest that the charter

was granted in recognition of the fact that the town was already prospering. During the 16th century, therefore, Maidstone appears to have been growing rapidly in both size and importance. The archaeological evidence indicates that the medieval buildings in this part of King Street were updated and modernised at about this time. It should however be borne in mind that, unless the foundations were extensively reworked, the archaeological evidence for the reconstruction of timber framed buildings can often be very slight.

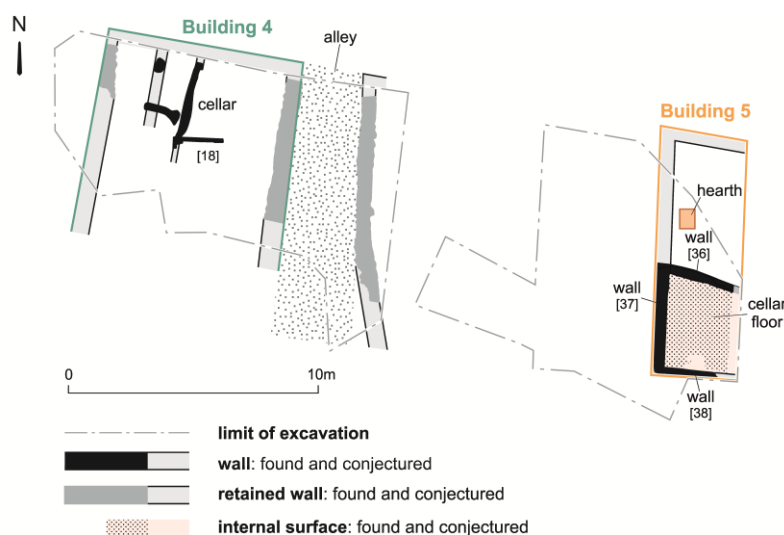


Figure 3: The principal features of the site in the 16th century

Building 4, at the western end of the site, represented a reconstruction of Building 1, whose external wall foundations it reused. Preparatory to the reconstruction, dumps were laid down to re-level the building plot, one of which, in the northwest part of the interior, contained pottery dated to 1480–1550. Otherwise, the principal evidence for the reconstruction consisted of the brick wall ([18]) for a cellar. The thin sunken margin present on one brick strongly suggests that they pre-date 1666: similar sized bricks were used at Rolvenden, Kent in the 16th century and at Restoration House, Rochester, Kent in c 1637 (Lloyd 1925, 98). Most of the brick cellar wall had been robbed but, within the cellar space, perpendicular beam slots ([74]; [76]) provided evidence for subdivisions within it. The cellar floor was at 16.70m OD.

Similarly, Building 3, in the eastern part of the site, was also modified or rebuilt to become Building 5. The Building 3 hearth noted above was replaced by a slab of Kentish ragstone, 1.1m long (north–south) and 0.64m wide. This slab was cracked, probably by fire and a trampled, charcoal-rich layer around it contained pottery dated to 1575–1700. At the rear of the building, a cellar ([36], [37]; [38]) was inserted with a floor level at 16.45m OD.

The 19th century

In the early 19th century, the western neighbour of Building 5 was rebuilt as Building 6, the extant remains of which consisted of a brick cellar with a fireplace, or a niche within which a kitchen range would have been set ([60]; [51]), built into its eastern

wall. The brick floor of the Building 6 cellar survived extensively at c 16.80m OD. A coal chute fed into the cellar from the King Street pavement. The construction of this cellar had destroyed any evidence for a predecessor to Building 6 but, as noted above, the entire street frontage can be presumed to have been occupied by buildings from the 13th century onwards.

The cellar of Building 5 remained in use into the 19th century and was resurfaced with concrete. The material from the backfill of the Building 4 cellar suggests that it too did not fall out of use until 1800–1850.

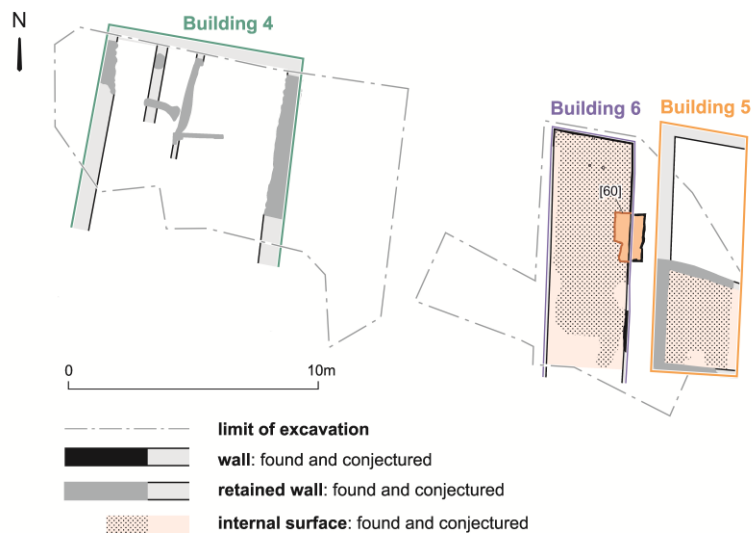


Figure 4: The principal features of the site in the 19th century

During the 19th century the population of the town expanded ever more rapidly, as a result of the arrival of the railways and associated industrialization: brewing and paper-making developed as two of the principal manufactures of the town. The character of King Street at the end of the 19th century is outlined by the *Kent Messenger Directory of Maidstone and Surrounding Villages*, which lists a range of shops and small businesses – tobacconists, a basket maker, bakers, a house agent and valuer, a dentist and signwriter.

Conclusions

The site uncovered the remains of buildings fronting onto the south side of King Street. The type of development revealed is typical of small towns across England: houses and shops constructed on narrow plots defined during the medieval period, with ancillary buildings and yards to the rear. The disposition of wall lines provides further evidence that the statute perch was an important unit of length employed when towns were laid out and the dating evidence for the earliest buildings indicates that development along King Street could have got under way during the first half of the 13th century. This would be entirely consistent with Maidstone having been re-founded as a town north of the River Len at a date around the beginning of that century.

The environmental samples taken from the floors of the earliest buildings recorded on the site, whilst containing some evidence for the consumption of beef and lamb, demonstrated that estuarine fish and mollusca were a dietary component. The charred cereal remains from the three King Street samples are typical of medieval assemblages in south-east England, with free threshing wheat (*Triticum aestivum/turgidum*) the most abundant and probably the most widely used cereal. Wheat was the favoured grain for bread-making as it produces a lighter and tastier loaf than other cereals. On this site oats also appear significant, and may have been eaten in pottage or been used for brewing, as well as providing food for horses and other livestock. Rye (*Secale cereale*) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) were rare, but both grains and chaff of these cereals were present in small numbers, and there were too few samples for their significance to be assessed. Apart from the cereals, plant food remains were limited to the hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*) shell and pulses (*Vicia/Lathyrus/Pisum sp.*) in sample {3}. Pulses were a valuable food source because of their high protein content and long storage life when dried. They were frequently added, with cereals, green vegetables and herbs, to pottage (Wilson 1973, 183).

The other concentrations of archaeological evidence relate to the reconstruction, or at the least very extensive renovation, of the buildings on the site during the 16th or early 17th centuries and again in the early 19th century. John Leland described Maidstone's prosperity in the 1540s and his "one long street well builded and full of inns" may very likely refer to the High Street which at its eastern end runs into, and continues as, King Street.

Acknowledgements

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