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The Faversham Society
Archaeological Research Group



Community
Archaeology

Understanding Ospringe

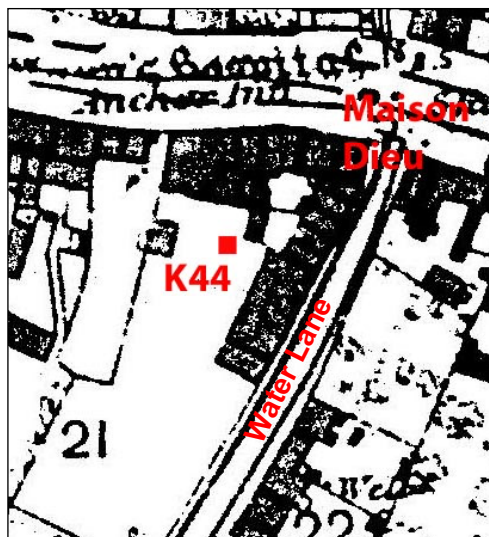
Report for Keyhole 44 21 Ospringe St, Ospringe, Faversham.

Grid Reference TR 00341 60837

1. Introduction

Number 21 Ospringe Street lies at the eastern end of a row of small much up dated cottages built in 1867, on the south side of Ospringe St.¹ Only two properties to the west stand between Number 21 and the Maison Dieu Museum.² The Maison Dieu is a scheduled site and is one of the only two surviving medieval buildings associated with the Hospital of St Mary (AD1234- c 1515)³ which occupied a large area to the north of Ospringe St and lay at the crossing point of the Westbrook stream. The 1865 OS map (**Fig 1**)⁴ shows that the location on which Number 21 was built in 1867 lay within the former boundaries of the Maison Dieu plot. The garden of Number 21 therefore represented the closest we could get to the Maison Dieu without infringing the scheduling. It also gave an opportunity to investigate our tentative theory that the original Roman Watling Street might have run parallel to and south of the modern A2 (Ospringe St), as it does just to the west at Syndale.⁵ This would contribute to understanding the present-day separation by main road of the surviving buildings of St Marys from the rest of the complex, now demolished (see K43 report).⁶

Fig 1: a) Keyhole 44 location in 1865.



b) Keyhole 44 location in 1907.⁷



¹ Swale Borough Council c 1990 *Townscape Survey: Ospringe Village*

² OS 2008 Serial number 00332800 Scale 1:1250

³ Frohnsdorff, M 1997 *The Maison Dieu and Medieval Faversham* Faversham Society: Faversham

⁴ OS 1865 (1904 reprint) Sheet XXXIV Scale 1:2500

⁵ Wilkinson 2009 'Syndale Park/Durolevum' *Practical Archaeology* Issue 10 p 18-19

⁶ www.community-archaeology.org.uk/projects/understandingospringe

⁷ OS 1907 Sheet XXXIV Scale: 1:2500

2. Location of pit

The keyhole was located as close to the house as possible in this long narrow garden, to make it as close to the Maison Dieu as possible. This made it 18m south west of the nearest point of the Maison Dieu and 22m south of the present road (the A2).

3. The procedures

A one metre square was pegged out using the planning square and the area delineated marked with string. The position of the square was recorded by measuring to mapped corners of the house. Turf was removed carefully from the square, rolled and set aside in plastic bags. The pit was then hand excavated using single contexts, each of which was fully recorded. The keyhole was excavated to the maximum safety depth of 1.2m, with a small slot taken down to 1.3m. All excavated soil was sieved meticulously, and the spoil heap scanned using a metal detector. Finds were set aside for each context and special finds were given three dimensional coordinates to pinpoint the exact find spot. Any features revealed were carefully recorded. Finally, the spoil was put back in, tamped down, watered and the turf replaced.

4. The findings

The top layer [01] was friable ashy soil with a high content of 19th century pottery fragments, bottle glass, iron nails and fragments of brick and tile. One eye catching find was a large black glass button in the shape of a coiled snake – perhaps from a mid Victorian mourning outfit. Two rubbish pits, [04] [05] and [06] [05], were sunk from this deposit into the yellowish clay below, and had similar content, with one also containing the bones of a complete goose or turkey. This yellowish clay also contained 19th century pottery, glass but much less ash and cinder. Context [02] also contained a few small sherds of medieval pottery. A clay pipe with a coat of arms including a unicorn was found in this context.

Fig 2: Flint pebble surface [08] penetrated by later rubbish pit (centre).

At around 50cm - 60cm down, a surface made of small flint pebbles was uncovered [08]. This was underlain by fine shingle and red brick and tile fragments [10] and penetrated by a circular rubbish pit, [09] [07]. The contents of the rubbish pit were removed first, and proved to have a content similar to [02] though with a higher proportion of the everyday 'London red wares'. These rough and ready red wares could be as early as 17th century but continued to be made up until around 1900. At the base of the pit [07], yellowish brown clay was revealed. The flint surface [08] and its base [10] were then removed and the deposit [11] surrounding the already excavated pit taken down beyond the pit base until a change to a dark brown clay layer with many inclusions of charcoal and small pyrites – type iron ore fragments [14].



Throughout the excavation of [11] the absence of glass, post medieval pottery and clay pipes was noted. Into the underlying layer [14] in the SW corner was sunk a small vertical sided pit thought to be a posthole, [13] [12]. After the excavation of the posthole, it was decided to take down [14] on the western half only. The pockets of charcoal and iron pyrites content became even more marked. At around 1.2m down, a light yellow clay layer became visible [15]. Although at the limits of normal excavation, it was decided safe to put down a small slot and at one centimetre below the top of [15] the deposit suddenly darkened and large flints started to show [17]. On removal of [17] a level surface of large tightly packed flints [16] was revealed. Complete oyster shells had been jammed vertically into the crevices. This surface was photographed and drawn, but at this point excavation had to stop for safety reasons.



Fig 3: The large flints comprising feature [16] can be seen at the bottom of the pit.

Post excavation analysis confirmed that below the first flint surface [08] and its substructure [10] all finds were medieval or earlier in date. Context [11] in particular contained a fair amount of Roman pottery, including some tiny fragments of Samian ware. Some of the pottery was slab-like shelly ware, similar to some found at Syndale in the gas pipeline excavations in 1994⁸ and dated to 1st / 2nd

century AD. [11] also, however, contained medieval and early medieval pottery. [14] had a similar mixture although the pottery was less common.

5. Interpretation

This keyhole was divided neatly by the upper flint surface [08], interpreted as a courtyard floor. The surface itself contained one of the few pieces of post medieval pottery found in this keyhole, a green and yellow tin glazed rim and some pipe stem fragments suggesting an early 17th century date. The clear division of dateable finds above and below [08] (taking into account the rubbish pit which was cut through [08] at a later date) gives a late 16th / early 17th century date for the creation of the courtyard, possibly a little earlier.

Above the courtyard, the deposits are those typical of urban devolvement in the Faversham and Ospringe area, i.e. dominated by 18th - 19th century material with an ever increasing proportion of cinder and ash as the top level is approached. Absent in this particular garden was an imported layer of top soil which is often present elsewhere in the area. It is possible that the change from context [01] to [02] relates to the building in 1867 of the terrace of which No 21 is part.

Below the courtyard was a succession of layers with fair amounts of both Roman and medieval pottery, as well as a few sherds of prehistoric. Whilst yielding some small fragments of Samian and other Roman fine wares, the presence of slab-like 1st / 2nd century ware from commercially used large storage jars⁹ does rule out the source of this material as disturbed burials and instead suggests economic activity and settlement nearby in Roman times. The presence of signs of iron working in layer [14] is also significant, although it was not possible to date this activity.

What is really interesting, of course, is the flint feature right at the bottom of the keyhole at a depth of 130cm. The substantial difference of 80cm of deposits between it and the late 16th / early 17th century courtyard above suggests that this is a Roman rather than medieval feature, and it is tempting to think we have discovered the route of the Roman road or at least a Roman courtyard, similar to the surface shown in the latest published material from excavations at Syndale.¹⁰ Such a diagnosis must, however, await comparison of the depth of this feature with the original medieval ground level, worked out from the Maison Dieu itself. It is obvious at a glance that the present day street level is well above the level at the time the Maison Dieu was constructed, and in 2009 careful surveying will be carried out to see how the building ground floor level and the lower flint surface [16] level in K44 relate to each other.

⁸ Sibor, L. 2001 'Excavation at Syndale Park, Ospringe' *Arch. Cant.* Vol. CXXI pp171- 196 . Pottery p 176 C.3

⁹ See North Kent Shell Tempered Ware in www.potsherd.uklinux.net/atlas/Ware/NKSH

¹⁰ Wilkinson 2009 op. cit. p19

6. Final comments

This was a very intriguing pit to dig. The flint pebble courtyard handily divided the deposits chronologically, and we found more Roman pottery than in any other Ospringe keyhole so far. Although those flints at the bottom of the keyhole did tempt us into over interpretation – is this the Roman road? - they did also raise questions which we had not yet addressed. One avenue was to do with the medieval road level (see above). Another provoked questions about what the archaeology of post Roman roads actually looks like: there are plenty of published accounts of excavations of Roman roads but I have found none on the overlying archaeology of later use (still looking!). One problem however was all too familiar: the best bit was right at the bottom of the excavation, just beyond our safety limits.

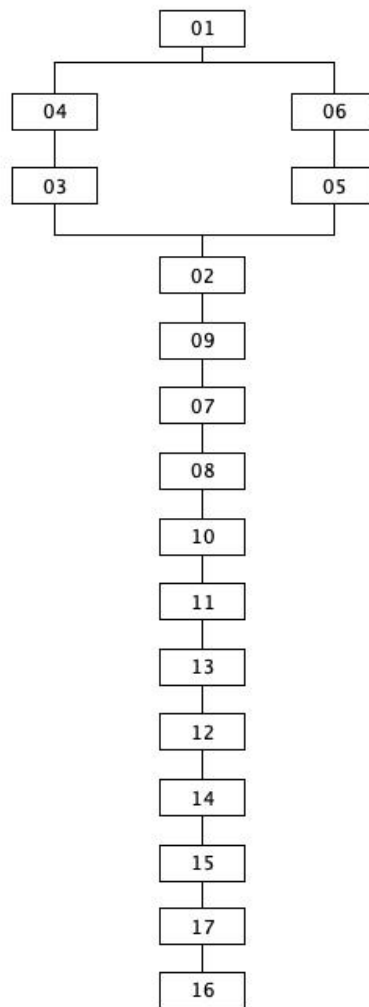
7. Acknowledgments

Great thanks to Seamus Fitzhenry and his family who gave us permission to dig in this unique location, and apologies for the delay in publication. Also to Suzanne Miles for supervising the excavation so carefully.

Dr Patricia Reid

April 2009

Appendix 1 Harris Matrix



Small Finds



SF1

Small Finds Details.

SF1: Black glass button in the form of a coiled cobra with head on top in centre. The reverse is dish shaped with a raised conical boss with a deep hole in the middle for attaching. Obverse: rows of beads outline the cobra's body, with the snake very well defined. Possibly an early-mid Victorian button where black glass is used to imitate jet.