

DOVER BEACON ARCHAEOLOGY – AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The Dover Beacon site lies to the west of the River Dour, on ground that slopes toward the river from 6m to 4.5m Ordnance Datum (OD). It sits on the western side of the St James development, investigated by CAT in 2015-16. Nineteenth and twentieth century development had caused significant truncation to the original ground levels with basemented buildings removing any medieval remains along the western, northern and southern boundaries of the site. The proposed development was designed to sit on a piled foundation with limited ground reduction required with this helping to preserve much of the surviving archaeology *in situ*. As a result, excavation was focussed on areas where surviving archaeology would be unavoidably impacted by elements of the development.

Geoarchaeology

As part of the current works CAT commissioned a borehole survey from Professor Martin Bates (Univ. of Wales), the results of which will be integrated into those from a series of over 100 boreholes that have previously been sunk into the surrounding area.

Prehistory and the Romano-British period

The borehole investigations revealed that this part of the Dour estuary was once protected from the open sea by a broad and high chalk cliff, similar to those that flank the eastern and western sides of the town. Tufa deposits were encountered at c. 7m beneath the present ground level, formed within the freshwater of the Dour when its estuary lay further to the south-west. Organic deposits containing terrestrial snails were also identified, with these probably part of the same sequence as those containing the Dover Bronze Age boat that was discovered just 4m to the south-west of the site boundary in 1992.

Analysis and dating of the recovered cores will help clarify when the Dour estuary was eventually inundated with marine salt water due to a collapse of the natural defensive chalk ridge. It is likely that this occurred prior to the Roman period as this part of the Dour was used as a harbour for the Classis Britannica (British Roman fleet). The Roman harbour was initially constructed from timber revetments, some of which were identified above the remains of the Bronze Age boat.

Further uncertainty surrounds the date for the infilling of the Roman harbour. The borehole cores record several mixed deposits of clay and eroded chalk, perhaps indicating a mixture of natural and deliberate infilling. Post-dating the Roman period this area was overlain with beach deposits of sand and gravel, with these forming the earliest identified horizon in the excavation areas.

The excavated sequence

Early medieval

A potential buried soil horizon was present above the beach that may have formed during the Anglo-Saxon period. During the late eleventh century to early twelfth century this ground was cut into by many intercutting pits and covered with dumped occupational refuse. At this time Dover Castle was being constructed, and it is likely that St James Street was formerly

established leading from a medieval quay up to the castle. On the west side of the site (closest to the Dour) the ground was levelled up with deposits of chalk, sand and occupational refuse.

Shortly after this initial levelling, formal buildings were constructed on the site. These likely fell within plots of land fronting onto the surrounding streets. Significantly the roughly square plot was subdivided by a north-west to south-east narrow route called Thorntons Lane. The lane remained in use up to the mid twentieth century, although much of the stratigraphy associated with its route was removed by a Victorian sewer system. On the west side of the lane buildings were established by the middle of the twelfth century. In comparison, to the east of the lane buildings were not present until the post-medieval period, presumably suggesting that this somewhat lower area remained marginal and was being gradually infilled.

The remains of the earliest buildings within were fragmentary and, due to later truncation, difficult to interpret. Substantial levelling deposits of rammed chalk were added to the ground onto which dwarf walls comprising chalk blocks and clay were established. These would have accommodated timber wall base plates and timber walls, long since removed or rotted away. What is clear is that these simple dwellings were occupied successively for four centuries. The majority of the remains were formed by a series of laminated floors, punctuated with burnt clay hearths, structural post-holes and covered by occupational refuse and hearth rake out material.

Late medieval and post-medieval

Significant change occurred around the sixteenth century AD. It appears that the small dwellings were swept away and larger plots established. At this point a substantial undercroft was built relating to a building that fronted Bench Street. The below ground structure was constructed of cut chalk blocks bonded with a lime mortar. A contemporary sketch shows it with a vaulted ceiling and lit by windows to the south. Access to the undercroft was possible from the south-east via a set of chalk block steps discovered during the excavation.

In addition to the undercroft far more substantial walls were constructed that bounded Thorntons Lane. The structures comprised large foundation cuts that were infilled with compacted chalk rubble. Above this the walls were constructed from Green Sandstone, sourced from nearby Folkestone.

Much of the excavated area was given over to backyards for buildings that fronted onto Bench Street and Townwall Street. The yards were continuously being levelled and resurfaced during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. At some point in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth century a large chalk and green sandstone built cess tank was constructed. This appears to have been associated with a public house or a wealthy merchant's estate, with the final infill containing hundreds of broken clay pipe stems and bowls, along with salt glazed ceramic fragments including Bellarmine Ware. Bellarmine Ware was imported from the Cologne region of what is today western Germany. The fragments recovered are from a type called 'Bartmann' (bearded man) jugs and were used for transporting and decanting wine. In addition to the ceramics, the cess tank contained a small assemblage of glass including goblets and an extensive animal bone assemblage including bird, fish, cow, pig, horse, sheep, dog, and cat.

A further six small cess tanks dating between the seventeenth and nineteenth century were excavated. All were built with chalk blocks and bonded with lime mortar. In addition, four large refuse pits were excavated containing abundant clay pipes and general building material. At this time five chalk block-built wells were built across the property plots.

On the east side of Thorntons Lane, post-medieval buildings were identified that fronted onto Mill Lane. These comprised small dwellings with clay floors, a peg tile hearth and a refuse pit containing abundant marine shell. It seems likely that these buildings may have had a medieval origin, with this view supported by very early post-medieval maps.

By the nineteenth century the land boundaries had changed and redevelopment of the street frontage of Bench Street and Town Wall Street led to the construction of basemented buildings that overlapped the former plots. This activity truncated the earlier medieval and post-medieval buildings in these locations, with further impacts caused by construction in the twentieth century.

1. Geoarchaeological cores used to investigate the Roman Harbour and earlier deposits



2. Taking column sample through possible Anglo-Saxon soils



3. Beach deposits cut by pits beneath twelfth and thirteenth century levelling layers and floors



4. Shellfish from medieval pit



5. Fishbone from medieval Dover



5a. Fish bones and scales



6. Fragment of decorated medieval jug handle (twelfth to fourteenth century)



7. Surveying medieval deposits within a building



8. Head of fifteenth century parchment pricker



9. Steps running down to late medieval undercrofted cellar



10. Mineralised textile recovered from environmental sample



11. Fifteenth to seventeenth century spindlewhorls the larger of which may have been for spinning rope



11a. Large spindlewhorl



12. Medieval or early post-medieval crucible



13. Early post medieval pit being cut by post medieval wall



14. Early post medieval buildings backing onto Thorntons Lane



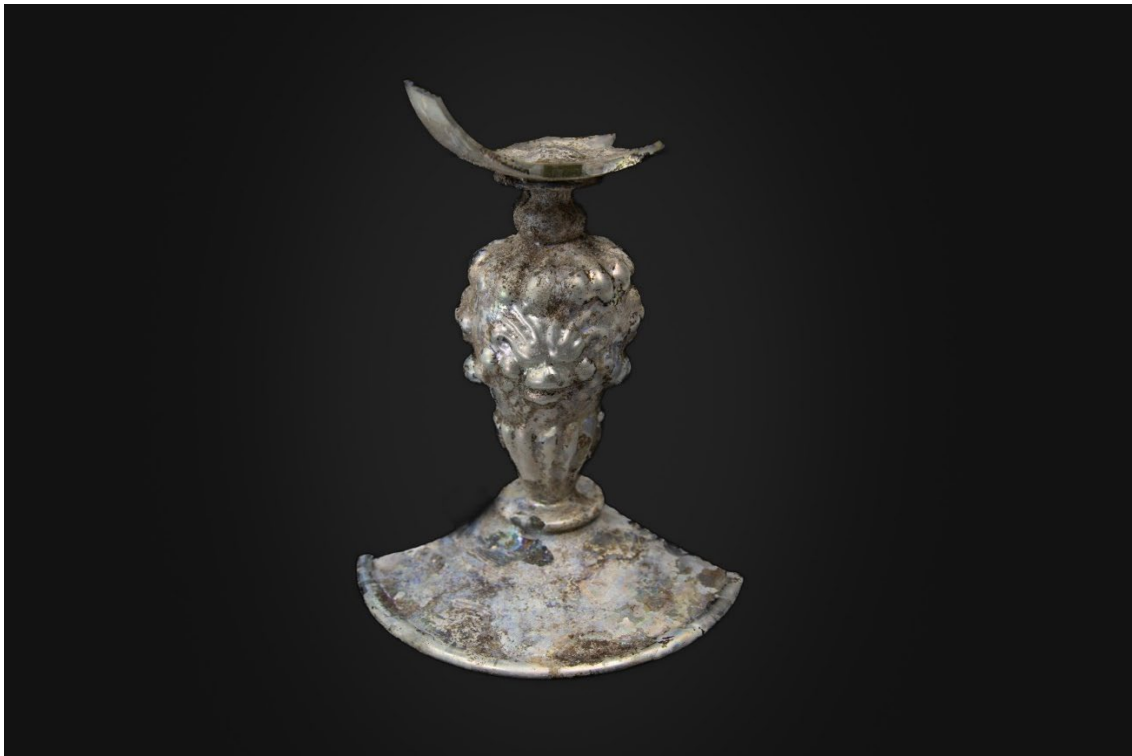
15. Sixteenth to Seventeenth century Bellarmine 'Bartmann' bottle neck



15a. Bartmann Jug



16. Sixteenth to eighteenth century glass vessel



17. Cleaning a burnt clay hearth within an early post medieval building



18. Sixteenth to seventeenth century clay tobacco pipes



19. Post medieval stoneware



20. Post medieval bone comb possibly made from whalebone



21. Site looking towards Dover Castle



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