

Report 3348

A Report on the plant remains  
from a 15th century pit in the  
Cox Street site, Coventry.

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COVENTRY - Cox Street site.

The site was in the centre of Coventry and consisted of a small, deep trench dug against the old town wall. At the time that the site was visited there was a good section in the side of the trench. A pit showed up clearly in this section because its fill was much darker than the surrounding layers. The pit was at the base of the section and was close to the foundations of the wall. On examination of the fill it was clear that plant remains e.g. twigs and wood / <sup>fragments,</sup> had been preserved by waterlogging. A bulk sample (F57) was taken from the pit by cutting back the section. A subsample was then taken so that the deposit could be examined for pollen. The bulk sample was washed and sieved / <sup>on</sup> a 300  $\mu$  mesh / <sup>and</sup> this process was repeated until all the organic material was separated and only clean sand remained. The flotant was paraffined to separate the insect remains. Float and residue from this process were stored in alcohol and were then sorted for plant and insect remains under a low power binocular microscope. The sample was very rich in remains. All identifications were made using modern reference material. The plants represented by the seeds found in sample F57 are listed below according to habitat preference.

Sample F57 has a possible late fifteenth century date. It precedes the construction of the town wall, which formed part of the Medieval defences of Coventry. The pit cut through several rubble layers and these showed signs of being associated with habitation because of the presence of quantities of pot, tile, bone and leather. The excavator recorded finds of leather, pot and shell within the pit. Whilst washing down the bulk sample it was noticed that it had a 'matted' feel and appearance which was possibly because of layers of compacted vegetation.

The plants represented by the macroscopic remains in the sample indicate a wide variety of habitats. As with any urban site the

Problem is one of sorting out whether vegetation has been brought to the site from surrounding land or whether it has grown locally. The largest group of species was of those associated with cultivated and waste land, amongst which there were obvious cornfield weeds eg. the corn cockle, corn marigold and cornflower. Cereal grains weren't detected in the deposit although the caryopses do not survive well under such conditions / they <sup>because</sup> become 'papery' and fragile when waterlogged. It is interesting to note that the pollen record shows much cereal pollen, in fact over 50% of the total pollen sum. The cereals and grasses make up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the total pollen. The pollen record shows the presence of Compositae, Chenopodiaceae and Cruciferae, certain species of which are also evident in the macroscopic remains and which are the common weeds of arable land / Plantago lanceolata, which is an important indicator species is present in low frequencies. The seeds of plants from wet habitats are dominated by the abundance of sedges, although the absence of aquatic pollen types poses a problem. Meadowland and heathland plants are represented in the macroscopic remains, <sup>The presence of heathland species is interesting and suggests that vegetation was being brought into the town from surrounding land.</sup> together with species which inhabit waysides and hedgerows / Within the category / I have listed the species of Brassica and these are commonly recorded as 'escapes from cultivation' and are put amongst the 'weedy' flora. Polunin (1969) states that Brassica napus is grown for its taproot for food or fodder and that Brassica nigra is grown for its seed which is used to make the condiment, mustard, or for its oil which can be used in soap making. Dennell (1970) records seeds of B. nigra from a Medieval sewer in Woolster Street, Plymouth. At the Cox Street site there is no definite evidence to confirm the use of <sup>cultivated Brassica species.</sup> and discusses them with respect to their deliberate cultivation / Trees are also represented in the pollen record and there is no way of determining whether this indicates local growth of the species. From the macroscopic and microscopic remains it would seem that the cereals, grasses and associated weeds dominated the flora.

any pits which are found to contain organic remains are grouped under the general heading of 'cess pits' because they have preserved the remains of food plants eg. blackberry and raspberry seeds, apple pips etc. which had probably been deposited in human excrement. The sample F57 was outstanding for not having this floral element. As there are no indications to suggest the depositing of sewage it could be that the pit was used as a dump for domestic refuse, in particular the floor sweepings from a house. According to documentary evidence it was common to use straw and rushes as a form of carpeting to cover bare stone floors. There were advantages in that these carpets were disposable and could be regularly cleaned out and new vegetation put down. (Mabey 1977, pp 140-143) This would explain the 'matted' nature of the deposit which could have resulted from the compaction of the stalks of the cereals, grasses and sedges. Cereal and grass pollen could have been transported on the bracts of the flower heads of the plants. (Robinson and Hubbard, 1977). The weeds from the fields where the crops were grown could have been gathered in by accident and possibly strewn on the floors too. Mabey (1977) quotes from 'The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes' written by John Gerard in 1633, to illustrate how other plants were used for carpeting, in particular the sweet smelling species such as Meadowsweet;

'The leaves and floures farre excell all other strowing herbes, for to decke up houses, to straw in chambers, halls and banqueting houses in the sommer time; for the smell thereof makes the heart merry delighteth the senses.'

There are some finds from the sample F57 which require further explanation. The five Cannabis sativa seeds are an interesting discovery. There are records of Cannabiaceae seeds and pollen having been preserved in retting pits and this suggests that the plant fibres were being used in rope making/ and also for hempen cloth. (Bradshaw et al., in press)

evidence for these recorded finds is poor. Godwin (1975)
 mentions a find of hempen rope from the Roman well at Bar Hill but
 suggests that this could have been an import and it seems uncertain
 as to the date of introduction of the plant and its subsequent
 cultivation. For the site at Coventry there is little evidence to
 suggest that the hemp was being grown for commercial purposes. The
 Scrophulariaceae pollen (cf. Borago) is another interesting find. Borago
 is a useful herb, Polunin (1969) states that it is sometimes used as
 a pot herb and to flavour beverages. Clapham, Tutin and Warburg (1962)
 record it as a 'garden escape' often found growing near to houses.
 This find would seem to support the idea of the pit being <sup>closely</sup> associated
 with habitation.

The 'clean' nature of the pit at Coventry is highlighted when comparison
 is made with the contents of obvious cesspits, latrines and drains. At the
 Woolster Street site in Plymouth there were many remains of food plants found in
 the sewer deposits (Dennell 1970). Fruit stones and pips of fig, plum, greengage,
 cherry, blackberry, raspberry and grape were discovered together with nut shell
 fragments of walnut, almond and hazelnut. Most of the fruits could have passed
 through the human gut and the indigestible pips etc. would have been deposited in
 the excrement. The nut shells would probably have been thrown away with other
 household rubbish. A cesspit of late thirteenth - early fourteenth century date
 was excavated in Goss Street, Chester. A sample from the bottom of the pit was
 examined for plant remains (Wilson 1972/73). The sample consisted mainly of
 fruitstones with a small amount of adherent material. A large majority of the
 stones were from sloes and bullaces (*Prunus* spp.). Other seeds from edible plants
 were noted to be fragmentary and the author states that this would be in accordance
 with the idea of grinding food prior to eating or even chewing during eating.
 This evidence is used to suggest that the remains of the food plants had passed
 through the human gut. A fifteenth century barrel latrine was excavated in
 Worcester and the deposits within contained the remains of twenty kinds of

edible plants (Greig in press). In pollen preparations of samples from the barrel there were intestinal parasite ova and this showed that some of the deposit must represent human faecal material.

The contents of the Coventry pit were completely different from those described above. There is no positive evidence to prove that it was a cesspit but <sup>was</sup> probably a hollow where floor sweepings and other household rubbish were thrown.

N.B. This study will not be complete without examination of the insect remains from F57. Preliminary identifications have been made (with help from P.J. Osborne) but more work is needed.

#### Bibliography

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seed list from sample F57

species of cultivated and waste ground

<u>Agrostemma githago</u> L.	Corn cockle	19	
<u>Anthemis cotula</u> L.	Stinking mayweed	4	
<u>Atriplex patula</u> L.	Common orache	8	
<u>Brassica cf. napus</u>	Rape (etc.)	11	Escape from cultivation
<u>Brassica cf. nigra</u>	Black mustard	20	
<u>Brassica sp.</u>		13	
<u>Cannabis sativa</u> L.	Hemp	5	A possible escape.
<u>Centaurea cyanus</u> L.	Cornflower	7	
<u>Chenopodium album</u> L.	Fat hen	9	
<u>Chenopodium cf. ficifolium</u> Sm.	Fig-leaved goosefoot	8	
<u>Chrysanthemum segetum</u> L.	Corn marigold	26	
<u>Petroselinum crispum</u> (Mill.)Nym.	Parsley	15	
<u>Polygonum aviculare</u> agg.	Knotgrass	7	
<u>Ranunculus sardous</u> Crantz	Hairy buttercup	1	
<u>Silene cf. vulgaris</u> (Moench)Garcke	Bladder campion	1	
<u>Sonchus asper</u> (L.)Hill	Prickly sow-thistle	2	
<u>Urtica dioica</u> L.	Stinging nettle	2	
<u>Viola cf. tricolor</u>	Wild pansy	1	

Species of pasture and meadow land

<u>Chaerophyllum aureum</u> L.		1	
<u>Daucus carota</u> L.	Wild carrot	2	
<u>Hypochoeris radicata</u> L.	Cat's ear	2	
<u>Leontodon taraxacoides</u> (Vill.)Mérat	Hairy hawkbit	1	
<u>Prunella vulgaris</u> L.	Self heal	3	
<u>Ranunculus cf. acris/bulbosus/repens</u>	Buttercup	13	

Species of hedgebanks and trodden places

<u>Lapsana communis</u> L.	Nipplewort	1	
<u>Licoris echinoides</u> L.	Bristly ox-tongue	1	
<u>Rumex sp.</u>	Dock	7	

List from F57 contd.

And species

<u>cf. disticha</u>	Brown sedge	24
<u>cf. divisa</u>	Divided sedge	20
<u>cf. elata</u>	Tufted sedge	15
<u>cf. flava group</u>	Yellow sedges	11
<u>cf. nigra</u>	Common sedge	3
<u>cf. rostrata</u>	Bottle sedge	2
<u>cf. fullonum</u> ssp?	Teasel	1
<u>sp. cf.</u>	Spike rush	10
<u>uniglumis/palustris</u>		

Species of heathland

<u>potentilla erecta</u>	Common tormentil	33
(L.) Rausch.		
<u>Stellaria graminea L.</u>	Lesser stitchwort	2

Pollen percentages from F57 (expressed as %'s of total pollen)

Tree pollen

Non tree pollen

<u>Alnus</u>	Alder	2%
<u>Betula</u>	Birch	1%
<u>Corylus</u>	Hazel	4%
<u>Quercus</u>	Oak	1%
<u>(Fraxinus)</u>	Ash	< 1%
<u>Salix</u>	Willow	< 1%
<u>Sambucus</u>	Elder	< 1%
<u>nigra</u>		

Cerealia	Cereals	54%
Chenopodiaceae		3%
Compositae:		
<u>Centaurea cyanus</u>	Cornflower	1%
<u>Centaurea nigra</u>	Knapweed	1%
Liguliflorae		1%
Tubuliflorae		2%
Cruciferae		1%
Gramin eae	Grasses	27%
<u>Plantago</u>	Plantain	1%
<u>lanceolata</u>		
( <u>Artemisia</u>		< 1%
<u>cf. Borago</u>	Borage	< 1%
Ericales	Heather	< 1%
<u>Polygonum</u>	Knotgrass	< 1%
<u>aviculare</u>		
Ranunculaceae		< 1%
<u>Rumex</u>		< 1%
Umbelliferae		< 1%

( < = less than )