

Animal

Level IV report on industrial bone refuse from The Causeway,  
Bicester

By Bob Wilson

Less than a thousand bones provide useful evidence of local 16th - to 19th - century industry. Most of the deposit was comprised of sheep bones and predominantly those of the metapodials and phalanges and some horn cores. Similar concentrations of sheep foot bones also have been found in Abingdon and Northampton and are complemented by deposits of other cranial debris and of the main meat carcass at other sites in Abingdon and Oxford.

These different deposits of sheep bones should represent waste from successive stages of carcass butchery and distribution from slaughterhouses, butchers stalls or shops, household kitchens and meals tables. In terms of meat supply, sheep trotters are the least useful carcass parts and the most likely to be put aside as less edible waste especially where frequent handling of carcasses occurs in towns and where carcass butchery became increasingly specialised and intensive during the late medieval and post-medieval periods.

At the Old Gaol, Abingdon, a slaughterhouse appears associated with a mid 16th- century concentration of metapodials. The entire bones recovered there suggest that the sheep feet were dumped directly after slaughtering and separation from the skins and the rest of the carcass. The deliberately fragmented debris from Bicester and from the Clothing Factory site in Abingdon shows a further stage of processing often occurred. Presumably the sheep feet were chopped up and boiled to extract fat and protein.

This process must be regarded as industrial since ordinary household bone waste was present only in small quantities. The virtual absence of sheep skull debris at the Causeway, indicates that the waste was not directly associated with stalls or shops of butchers, where sheep heads would be sold whole or split in half to obtain the brains and other meat.

After the excavation an accumulation of horn cores of cattle was found nearby and this suggests some association with the tanning or horn working trades, as is also indicated by comparable evidence in Oxford and Northampton. Yet it is unlikely that the separate wastes were processed in the same way or by people in an identical business or else the bone debris would have been mixed together.

Although the Bicester bones may be closely related to the treatment of sheep skins, it appears they mainly represent waste from the extraction of a variety of raw materials which were used to make products such as candles, boot grease, soap and glue. The documentary evidence helps to suggest that tallow chandlers, butchers who owned slaughterhouses, or fellmongers were most involved in the processing of the sheep feet.

The bones may have been dumped near to where they were processed or carried some distance from the premises. They were scavenged afterward by dogs. The debris accumulated mainly during the 16th to 18th centuries but of course dumping of refuse may have continued elsewhere. During the 19th century, the top level of these deposits may have been disturbed, for example by gardening.