

Archaeological Leather Group

Newsletter

Number 7 - Autumn 1991

Editorial

Apologies for the long gap between this newsletter and the last. One reason has been the scarcity of material with which to create a newsletter! The bibliography has also taken longer than anticipated to compile, in an attempt to leave 'no stone unturned' in a search of references.

Such is the number of bibliography references for the period 1100 to c1600, that it will be issued in instalments in this and subsequent issues of the newsletter. No doubt there are omissions, so please send in information on these.

The next meeting has been arranged for Wednesday, 16 October 1991, at the William Cowley Parchment Works, Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire and the Central Museum and Art Gallery, Northampton. We will visit the Parchment Works in the morning, returning to Northampton for lunch and a business meeting in the afternoon.

This meeting is vital to the future of the group. Alison Hems (Secretary) and I have felt for some time - and I am sure that this will be echoed by many members - that the Group is suffering from the lack of a committee! Up till now, there have been three individual 'officers' - Secretary, Treasurer, and Newsletter Editor; both the Secretary and the Treasurer, Clare Thomas, wish to stand down.

We wish to propose that the meeting sets up and elects a small committee of, say, 5 people. I would also suggest that we take a fresh look at all aspects of the Group - aims, meetings, activities, publications, subscriptions, and so on. Some good ideas have been expressed at meetings in the past, and we now need to bring these to fruition. The Group also needs *your* new ideas, so please come along and ensure the continuance of a very useful forum.

In the meantime, please keep contributions

coming in for the Newsletter, eg. notes on finds, books published, references to obscure publications, 'mystery' objects for identification, terminology, etc.

A brief Newsletter will follow the October meeting, to report on decisions made at the business meeting. Until then, don't worry if you think you haven't paid a subscription recently!

Again, thanks to Tim Padley for producing the Newsletter with his DTP.

Diana Friendship-Taylor

Central Museum, Guildhall Road, Northampton, NN1 1DP

Current Research in Leather-Working from Irish Sites

Dáire O'Rourke

In the last ten years, government and EC incentive schemes have meant that a lot of urban development has been carried out in Irish cities. Development within the city has meant that excavation has taken place. The excavations within a number of cities in Ireland such as Dublin, Waterford, Wexford, Cork, and Galway has led to an influx of organic material, including the usual large quantities of leather material. This recent development means that much post-excavation is within various stages ie. some is finished, some is under current research, and some is still awaiting time and resources to be completed.

In the autumn of 1988, I completed an MA thesis for University College, Dublin on the leather footwear from 10th and 11th century Dublin. The material primarily came from the Fishamble Street

sites excavated by Dr. P.F. Wallace in the latter part of the 1970's, with the material from smaller sites such as St. John's Lane, Winetavern Street, and some High Street sites. This thesis is currently in preparation for publication.

I shall give a small account of medieval and post-medieval material so far unearthed from Irish Sites.

Medieval Period

Footwear

The 10th and 11th century footwear from Dublin is very similar to that material found elsewhere in Britain and the Continent during this period. It is dominated by the wrap-around ankle-boot seamed at the side, which range from a slip-on variety through various arrangements of thong slits. This side seamed ankle-boot is evident in Dublin from the early 10th to the mid 11th century. Another style of ankle-boot is one which is very similar to the former, but is seamed at the back. This type is only evident in the latter part of the 11th century. A third style of shoe is the slip-on slipper, which is paralleled among the shoes from London (Pritchard, pers comm) and also from York (MacGregor 1978, fig. 34; Richardson 1959, fig. 21). With the Dublin shoe as well as the London and York examples, the pointed seat of the sole extends to form the back of the shoe where it is stitched to the quarters. Among the Dublin assemblage, this shoe is only found in the 10th century.

The final type of footwear to come from the 'Viking Period' in Dublin is one which to the writer's knowledge is unique amongst European assemblages. It is found only in 11th century contexts and is different to the other styles, as the height of the quarters dictate that it is a boot. Like the first style mentioned above, this boot is side-seamed. It reached as high as the lower calf. It follows the wrap-around technique. The top edge was arranged in one of two ways:

- A. About 10mm of leather is folded from the grain side onto the flesh side and there is a small row of decorative slits along the length of the fold.
- B. The top edge is cut regularly.

In most cases the pointed seat of the sole extends to partly form the back of the upper. There are invariably two rows of slits running midway along the quarters in a fastening capacity and undoubtedly to give support to the boot without the quarters sagging. Remains of leather thonging have been found within each row of slits. As there appears to be no parallel for this style of footwear,

it is interpreted as an insular development of the wrap-around ankle-boot with the top band and may be seen as a definitive Hiberno-Norse style.

The leather from later medieval periods from the 13th-16th century is exemplified in the material from excavations in Cork, Waterford and in the few medieval layers uncovered during the Dublin Castle excavations.

The most common style of footwear from the late 12-early 13th century in Waterford is a wrap-around ankle-boot which invariably is decorated with central vamp stripes. Below the top edge of the heel and quarters is a continuous row of slits. The fact that they are pulled and occasionally torn suggests that these slits were functional in fastening and supporting the quarters. In a number of instances a very long thin strip of leather extends from the centre of the heel and would have lain straight in the centre of the back of the ankle and lower leg. However, it is very flimsy and so difficult to know how it would have been supported.

The footwear from Cork City is predominantly 13/14th century in date. The 13th century assemblage is very similar to that found in Waterford. The wrap-around ankle-boot with slightly extended pointed toe, decorative vamp stripes and continuous row of slits around the quarters is common place. In the 14th century the toggle fastened shoe is quite common.

Excavations were carried out in High Street in Dublin in the summer of 1989, where the excavated material has a date range from the late 11th to the 13th century. The only upper from this period is a wrap-around boot belonging to the variety mentioned above. The material from the 12th and 13th centuries belongs to the side or back seamed ankle-boots which were fastened by thongs threaded through continual slits. In the 12th and early 13th centuries they were fastened at the side only. In one instance the central vamp seam is both functional as well as decorative as the vamp is in two distinct pieces. This is not unusual amongst the Dublin footwear as it is also evident in some 11th century examples from Fishamble Street. In this case the central vamp stripe has a functional as well as decorative element.

Sheaths and Scabbards

The sheaths and scabbards from Dublin, Cork and Waterford are typical of this period. Sheaths from the 12th century are common from Cork, Waterford and Dublin which are crudely seamed at the side with a leather thong. The back seamed sheaths

and scabbards, where the seam is either in the centre or to one side is found in the late 12th/early 13th century contexts from the Cork City excavations. Where decorated they are invariably stamped with heraldic style shields. One scabbard which unfortunately is unprovenanced displays a remarkable stamped decoration. This consists of a hunter or warrior with a long shield attacking a long tailed beast. The scabbard is side seamed perhaps suggesting a tentative date in the 11-late 12th century, though this date is purely arbitrary.

Miscellaneous

The remainder of the leather assemblage from this period consists of the usual array of belts, straps, handles, circular perforated discs, some harness material etc...

Post-Medieval Leather

The excavations which have so far revealed post-medieval finds are ones from Galway City and Dublin Castle. The finds from Galway are all dump material with only one complete vamp which is one with a central tongue extension, with two perforations for the attachment of two latches. The material from Dublin falls broadly into the late 16th to early 18th centuries, with the majority of finds coming from the 17th century moat fills.

The vast bulk of the material is footwear, almost all of which fall into the above category ie latchet fastened shoes with open sides. The stacked heels are either pegged together, nailed together or else affixed by a combination of both methods. The non-footwear material consists of a large number of belts and straps, and a small number of bags and back seamed scabbards which are undecorated.

An interesting aspect of this assemblage are the five spurs or spur fragments which have been found. All are from 17th century contexts and where the material type was identifiable it was found to be cattle.

This is a very general view of the current state of leather finds and research in the Irish context, and I hope that it may be of some interest to the readers of this newsletter.

Bibliography

- MacGregor, A, 1978, 'Industry and Commerce in Anglo-Scandinavian York', in R.A.Hall (ed), *Viking Age York and the North*, CBA Res Rep 27, 37-57
- Richardson, K.M, 1959, 'Excavations in the

Northampton Museums Concealed Shoe Index

Andrew Mackay,

Keeper, Boot and Shoe Collection, Northampton Museums

In the 30 months or so that I have been dealing with Northampton Museum's concealed shoe index, 32 finds have been recorded - a fairly good average considering that we are in the main relying on other museums to:

- a. Know about our index.
- b. be aware of the concealed shoe superstition.

I believe that there are hundreds of concealed shoe finds every year that go unrecorded and that our one a month average is merely the tip of the iceberg. A recent article in *The Independent* concerning a possible shoe concealment in the recently discovered coal mine in Leicestershire (believed to be the oldest on record) mentioned our index and so far that has produced four non-museum responses. I am sure that many more will appear if we advertise in the relevant publications.

Of the 32 recorded concealments we have had since November 1988, one of the most interesting was from a toll house dated 1815 in Chiselden, Wiltshire. Here renovation work had revealed a brick-sided, L-shaped pit, dug into the chalk bedrock. This stood in an outhouse, which was later used as a toilet, beneath a concrete floor estimated to have been laid in the 1920's.

The pit was filled with a mixture of chalk rubble and artefacts including eleven shoes, mostly incomplete, but one woman's boot seemed to date to post 1885, one man's blucher (work) boot post 1900 and one child's boot, also post 1885. Perhaps this is a typical example of what Denise Dixon-Smith (in her article in the last ALG Newsletter) describes as a 'family' group. Along with the shoes, there were iron implements, including a flat iron, part of a frying pan, nails, and the blades of a large scraper and semicircular chopper. There were also five conkers and a stoneware ink or blacking bottle.

The earliest shoe recorded from the time I have been at the Museum was dated as being from the first half of the 17th century. It was brought to our attention via Chris Morris, Curator of Gloucester Folk Museum (who is also our most consistent supplier of finds) in May of last year and was actually found inside a lath and plaster wall in the

SPCK shop in Gloucester city centre.

The shoe is a child's of the open-side latchet-tie style, with the leather sewn flesh outermost. It had obviously been a good quality and probably expensive shoe in its time as it had an integral toe-cap and is fully lined.

There are no areas of England and Wales that are obviously absent in the Concealed Shoe Index but regrettably, Scotland and Ireland seem to be under represented but I think this is due to poor communication in the museum world. Of the 32 I have been personally involved with, we have had finds from Cornwall and Sussex, three from Northumberland, three from Wales and six from Gloucester, to name but a few. Another interesting statistic one can throw out from these finds concerns the location in which they are located in the buildings. Six were found in or around fireplaces or chimneys, but surprisingly four were recorded as being found in ovens.

Reasons for such high proportions of finds to be associated with fireplaces are covered in Denise's previous article and need not be repeated.

In March 1989 we received word from Bowes Museum in County Durham that a number of clogs had been found buried in a disused lead mine. One obviously thinks that boots and shoes would often be found lying casually in or around disused industrial sites, but here the finder is adamant that the clogs had deliberately been buried in a pile of rubble underground. He then goes on to suggest that this is a common occurrence in metal mines and can be linked to the domestic superstition of using the shoes as good luck charms.

Initially, we viewed this variation on a theme rather sceptically but two other reports have come in since then, both from museums, in which similar practices have been discovered. The most recent of course is the Leicestershire find (which I mentioned earlier as being reported in *The Independent*) which is important not only as it the oldest known mine but also because complete medieval costume (as well as the boots) has been discovered.

I personally have drawn no conclusions on the possibilities of shoes deposited in mines (or indeed any industrial findings) being purposely deposited for the same reasons as footwear hidden in domestic buildings. It seems likely however that people's superstitious nature would remain with them whether at home or at work, presumably more so at work where the danger is increased. It will be interesting to see if other shoes are brought to our attention from sites of industrial manufacture.

* See note on page 5.

Book Review

Arnold, Janet *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd*

Maney, Leeds, 1988

Price £75-00

With its 376 pages, 460 black and white illustrations and 16 in colour, this is the long awaited, definitive commentary on the inventories of Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe, on which the author has worked for eighteen years. It will remain the ultimate source of information on dress in the second half of the sixteenth century for many years. For the inventories include not only the Queen's wardrobe, but also her gifts to others: her servants, foreign knights and Mary, Queen of Scots. While the greater part of the book is obviously devoted to major items of dress, the splendid robes designed to dazzle her courtiers and foreign visitors (and all the known portraits of her are included, together with her contemporaries, with enlargements of the fine detail demanded by costume students), there are also sections devoted to accessories: jewellery, embroidery, hoods, gloves, fans, stockings and shoes.

The footwear will, of course, be of special interest to our readers, and the main section occurs on p.210-6, but there are also references on p.46-7, 105-6, 110, 206, and 326. So it takes time to locate all the references. The last page lists the pantobles in the 1600 inventory, though it would obviously have helped to have had all the original references.

The main section concerns the shoemakers and their work, and it is marvellous to have some information on the men involved (makers and a closer), their tools, and a tantalizing mention of two lasts in 1584. Does this imply that the Queen was already having her shoes made straights? The shoes appear to have been made a snug fit, for enough 'shooing horns' were bought to have one always to hand. And how economical the Queen was, in spite of opulent appearance, with a number of examples of translating or new vamping recorded - doubtless saving exquisite embroidered uppers and re-making in the latest style. How gorgeous some of the shoes were can only be guessed from the finely pinked shoes illustrated, though made for lesser mortals. But surely 306 with the large open side is post 1610, and the tunnel stitching mentioned in the caption was common to the end of the eighteenth century.

As the reign is treated as an entity, it is not easy to get a clear picture of the style at any one time. But it is clear that velvet shoes were most popular with the young Queen, who gradually changed to Spanish leather by 1575. It was during her reign of course, that heels were introduced, and it is tantalizing to speculate on the references to heels as early as 1564, though there can be no ambiguity about 'heels with arches' in 1595. There is also evidence for the wearing of pantobles as overshoes as well as for slippers indoors, though Shakespeare's joke about chopines in *Hamlet* suggests that they were regarded as a strange style here too, though never as extreme as in Italy. Altogether it is a goldmine to go on quarrying, and will be a marvellous foundation for future students to build on.

June Swann

* See Swann, J.M., "Shoes Concealed in Buildings". Reprinted from Journal of the Northampton Museum & Art Gallery, 6 (1969) and supplement of 1981.