

Cathedral School Sports Hall

Archaeological Investigations Ltd. were contracted to monitor groundworks during the construction of a new Sports Hall for Hereford Cathedral School. The site lies within one of the country's most historic cities. There is documentary evidence referring to Hereford as far back as 676AD. The new Sports Hall is located within the old Saxon town just next to the line of defences with a ditch which once measured 16m in width by 3m in depth. The defences are believed to date from the 9th century AD - some of the earliest Saxon defences in the country, predating the Saxon burghs established around 910AD. During the excavation of a service trench beneath the surface of East Street, we revealed a deposit of heavy grey clay sealed beneath a gravel deposit. Comparing the sequence of deposits with previously recorded sites on the line of the defences, it would appear that we had uncovered the 'Stage 2' turf and clay rampart which dates between the late 9th and early 10th centuries AD. The overlying gravel does not fit in with the previously recorded defensive sequence but may be an 11th century repair to the rampart. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records Earl Harold (later King) refortifying Hereford in 1055 in response to the threat of raids by Llewelyn of Wales. It is possible that the gravel we encountered relates to this phase of works. A metallised surface overlay the gravel rampart deposits. It is probable that this functioned as a precursor to the present East Street. The defences - which had been abandoned in this area by the 11th century - would have provided a suitable thoroughfare through the city. To the south of the rampart deposits, beneath the new sports hall, a pit was revealed containing large amounts of metal working debris. Sealing the pit was a burnt clay deposit overlying a lens of charcoal rich material. The intensity of the heat indicated by the deposits would suggest an industrial origin. Associated pottery suggests a date for the feature between the late 12th and early 13th centuries. The pottery shown here is among the earliest from the site and dates to between the 10th (top right), the 12th (bottom right) and between the 11th and beginning of the 13th centuries AD (left). The 10th century sherd shows sooting on the exterior, from use as a cooking vessel. Both the remaining sherds are from larger pitchers. There is a lack of evidence for activity on the site between the 14th and 17th centuries. A map of 1610 shows that the site is occupied, so it seems likely that deposits relating to this period have been removed or disturbed by later activity. A deep post-medieval topsoil deposit covered the site. An 1857 map of Hereford shows large formal gardens to the rear of No. 1 Castle Street, and the topsoil may have been imported during the landscaping of these gardens. Even today East Street stands higher than the ground on either side, reflecting the buried defensive deposits beneath the tarmac. It seems possible that soil was deposited over the site to make up the ground level to the height of what was left of this earthwork. Our fieldwork is now complete but we are awaiting the results of analysis of environmental samples taken from the earliest deposits on the site. Hopefully the results will give us an indication of the Saxon Herefordian diet!