

# A MEDIEVAL SITE IN PRIORY ROAD, HIGH WYCOMBE, BUCKS

PAULINE AND STANLEY CAUVAIN

*The site of a medieval building platform was discovered during development work in High Wycombe. The pottery is described.*

## *Introduction*

While supervising the excavation of footing trenches for a new building on vacant ground to the rear of the Wesley Methodist Church in Priory Road, High Wycombe in 1989 the site foreman, Stephen Fairchild, noticed a quantity of bone and pottery in the spoil. He reported the finds to the County Museum and with the permission of J. Needham Ltd a limited investigation was arranged to determine the nature of the finds. The results of that investigation form the basis of this note.

## *The Site*

The Wesley Methodist Church is located on the eastern side of Priory Road, High Wycombe, adjacent to and south of the railway line. The church stands on the side of a hill at about 90m above sea-level and overlooks the nearby Parish Church to the south. The ground to the rear of the church had been levelled in the recent past and used as tennis courts. Construction trenches were being cut through the relatively loose levelling material down to the hard, natural chalk hillside on which the site stands.

The pottery and bones first noted by the builders was derived from a brown soil layer below the material used to level the site and immediately on top of the natural chalk. Parts of the brown soil had been removed by the builders but its extent could be traced in the sides of the footings trenches and it extended over at least 18 square metres (Fig. 1). Only one feature was recorded and that was a small stake-

hole which had been sectioned by a builder's trench.

A composite section in a part of the trench revealed that the brown soil was covering a level platform which had been cut into the natural chalk of the hillside. The depth of the brown soil was fairly uniform, being 0.5–0.6m. Within the brown soil were small fragments of chalk, especially towards the bottom of the soil. In the limited sections available there was no sign of stratigraphy. The platform is likely to have been the site of a building. During later building work about 8m west of the investigated area the site foreman recovered a further quantity of pottery from 'a small, partly circular feature, black in colour and damp'. The description suggests the site of a well and since the pottery is very similar to that recovered earlier it was probably contemporary with the house platform.

## *The Finds*

### *The Pottery*

Because of the circumstances of recovery the finds have been treated as one group. A total of 154 pottery sherds were recovered:

Rims	unglazed	8
	unglazed, decorated	1
	glazed (with part handle)	1
Bases	unglazed	20
Body sherds	unglazed	98
	unglazed, decorated	4
	glazed	17
	glazed, decorated	5

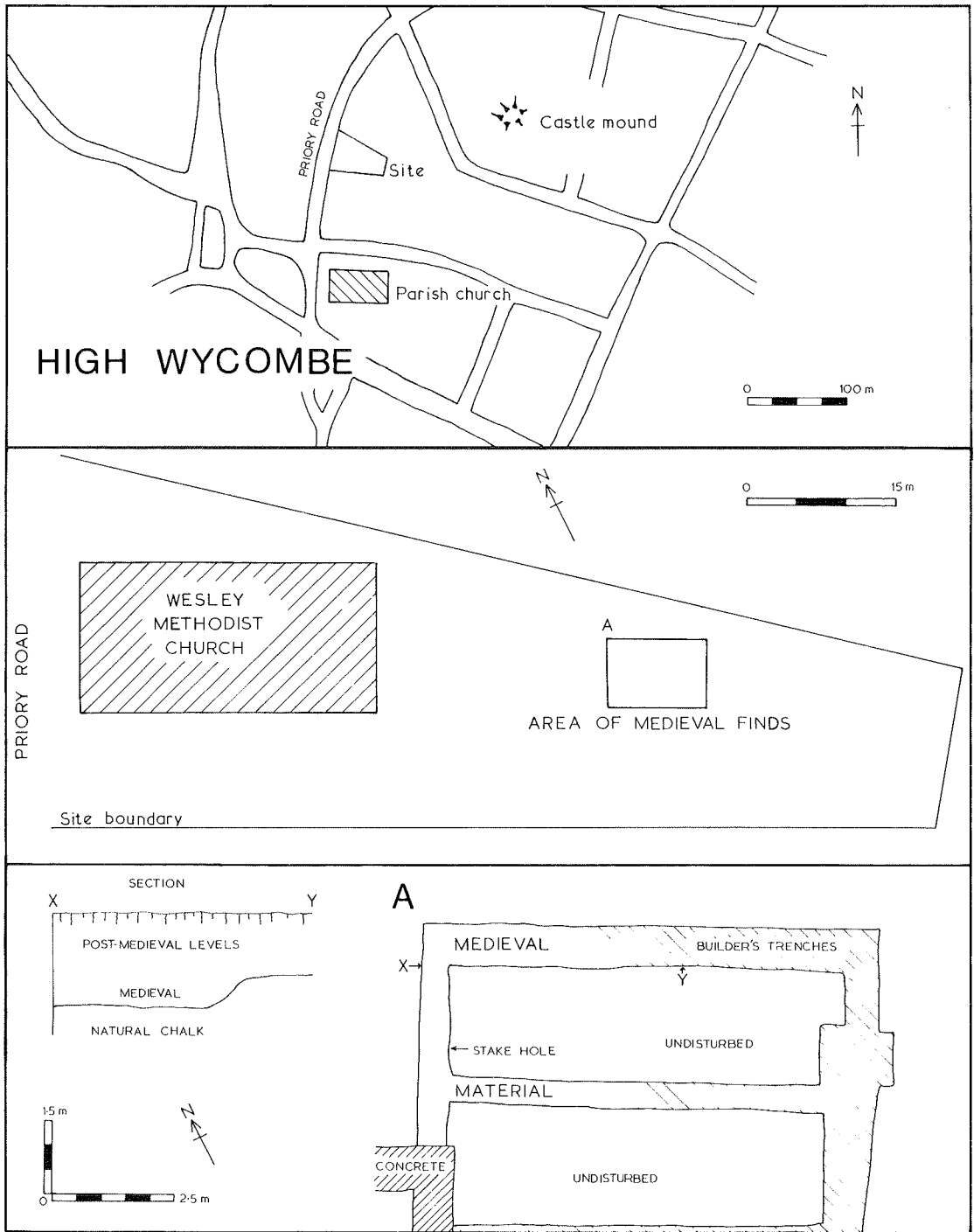


Fig. 1. Site location.

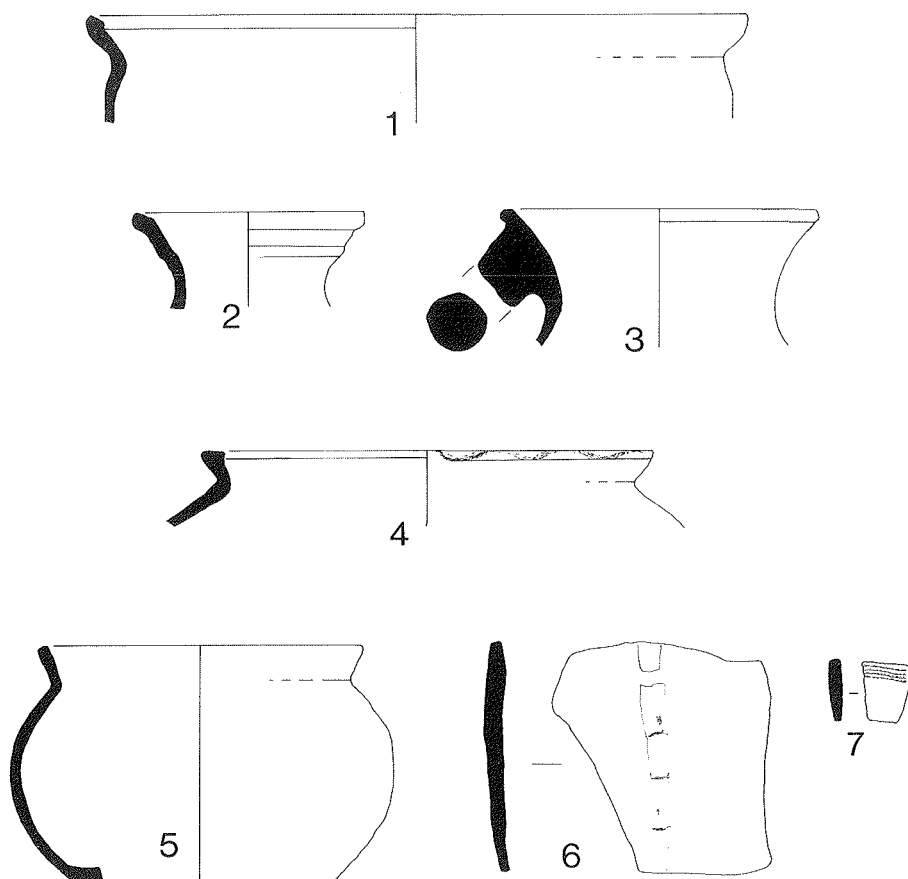


Fig. 2. Medieval pottery (1/4 scale).

Since many of the pottery sherds exhibited fresh breaks due to the recent building activity the number of vessels represented by the collection will be low and probably not more than 25 or so. Few of the pottery forms were identifiable with certainty but glazed jugs and storage jars were both present.

The pottery fabric was fairly hard in texture with large numbers of small quartz grains, mostly less than 0.5mm, with occasional grains up to 1mm in size. Many of the sherds were from pots fired under reducing conditions with black and grey colours predominating, though some more oxidized brown and orange colours were present. Most of the pottery had a grey core. Glaze colours were mostly light green or yellow-green.

#### *The Illustrated Pottery (Fig. 2)*

1. Large storage jar. Dark grey exterior, grey-brown interior, grey core.
2. Narrow necked jar. Black exterior colour on red-brown core.
3. Jug with part of the handle. Green glazed exterior. Orange-brown fabric colour with grey core.
4. Storage jar with finger-decorated rim from probable well. Dark grey colour with light grey core.
5. Small storage jar from probable well. Black exterior colour, grey core and patchy grey-brown interior.
6. Storage jar with applied thumb-strip. Grey-brown colour with grey core.
7. Part of patchy green glazed jug. Brown interior colour with grey core.

#### *Tile*

There were three pieces of tile in a similar fabric to the pottery but with a heavy dusting of very small quartz grains on one side. Two of the

tiles had small patches of mortar adhering to them suggesting that they were derived from a wall or floor. The mortar contained large numbers of quartz grains, some up to 2mm across.

#### *Animal bones*

A quantity of animal bone (1.4kg) was recovered from the brown soil. Cattle, sheep and pig were all present. Three bones exhibited knife marks and three others deliberate butchering marks. Two further pieces of bone had been burnt.

#### *Dating the Finds*

There are two main problems when trying to date the finds: one is the restricted nature of the investigation and the second is the lack of comparative material from medieval High Wycombe. The pottery forms, limited though they are, suggest a date between the later twelfth and earlier thirteenth centuries. The body sherd from the large storage jar (Fig. 2.6) compares well with coarse wares found from the same period in London (Vince 1985).

The pottery is wheelthrown and likely to have been made locally at some as yet unlocated kiln. The fabric is harder and less sandy in texture than either of the fourteenth-century industries at Denham or Penn/Tylers Green. The pottery forms and fabric from Priory Road have some similarities with the coarse, sand-tempered wheelthrown greywares known from kiln sites and occupation sites in South Hertfordshire and Middlesex from the late twelfth to the mid thirteenth centuries.

#### *Conclusion*

The heart of the medieval borough of High Wycombe in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries was the old market place situated between the parish church and the area known as Frogmore (Ashford 1960). The site in Priory Road, being some way north of the market place at this period, was probably outside the 'town' but Ashford's description of the medieval borough in the early thirteenth century provides a clue as to the nature of the discoveries in Priory Road:

The only other road within [the borough] was a narrow lane which ran roughly parallel to the High Street, forming a typical 'back-lane' to the burgess plots along its northern side, and linked the head of Crendon Lane with the market place; here were situated the Abbess's [of Godstow] farm-buildings, later called the Parsonage Farm, and the vicarage. The 'back-lane' described by Ashford is the Castle Street of modern High Wycombe so the medieval building platform described in this note is undoubtedly situated on land belonging to the Abbess of Godstow. As to which of the buildings it was we cannot say, but the farm seems a more likely contender than the vicarage.

#### *Acknowledgements*

We wish to thank J. Needham Ltd for permitting this investigation to take place, and Mr S. Fairchild for reporting the finds to the County Museum and for his continued interest.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashford, L. J. 1960. *The History of the Borough of High Wycombe* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London).
- Vince, A. G. 1985. 'The Saxon and Medieval Pottery of London: A Review', *Med. Arch.* 29, 25-93.