

Archaeology in Sutton Coldfield

A report on the archaeological
implications of development
in the central area of Sutton
Coldfield.

Department of Archaeology
and Local History,
City Museums & Art Gallery,
Birmingham.

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Archaeology & History

The archaeological evidence for the whole of the former borough of Sutton Coldfield has been set out recently by M. A. Hodder. No material earlier than the 12th century has been recorded from the town centre itself, and of this 12th century material all has been imported from beyond the confines of the present town centre. Using the available documentary evidence the history of Sutton appears to have been as follows.

Tradition, embodied in the early 14th century customs of the manor, maintained that from the time of King Athelstan (924 - 940) there had been a windmill in Maney and a watermill in Sutton, both belonging to the lord of the manor. This early watermill appears to have occupied the later medieval manorial site, just NE of the Manor House, the present Parade being the main entrance to the town from the south and following the line of the dam. A hunting lodge on the site of the later manor, first documented from the late 13th century, is also said to have been in use before the Conquest.

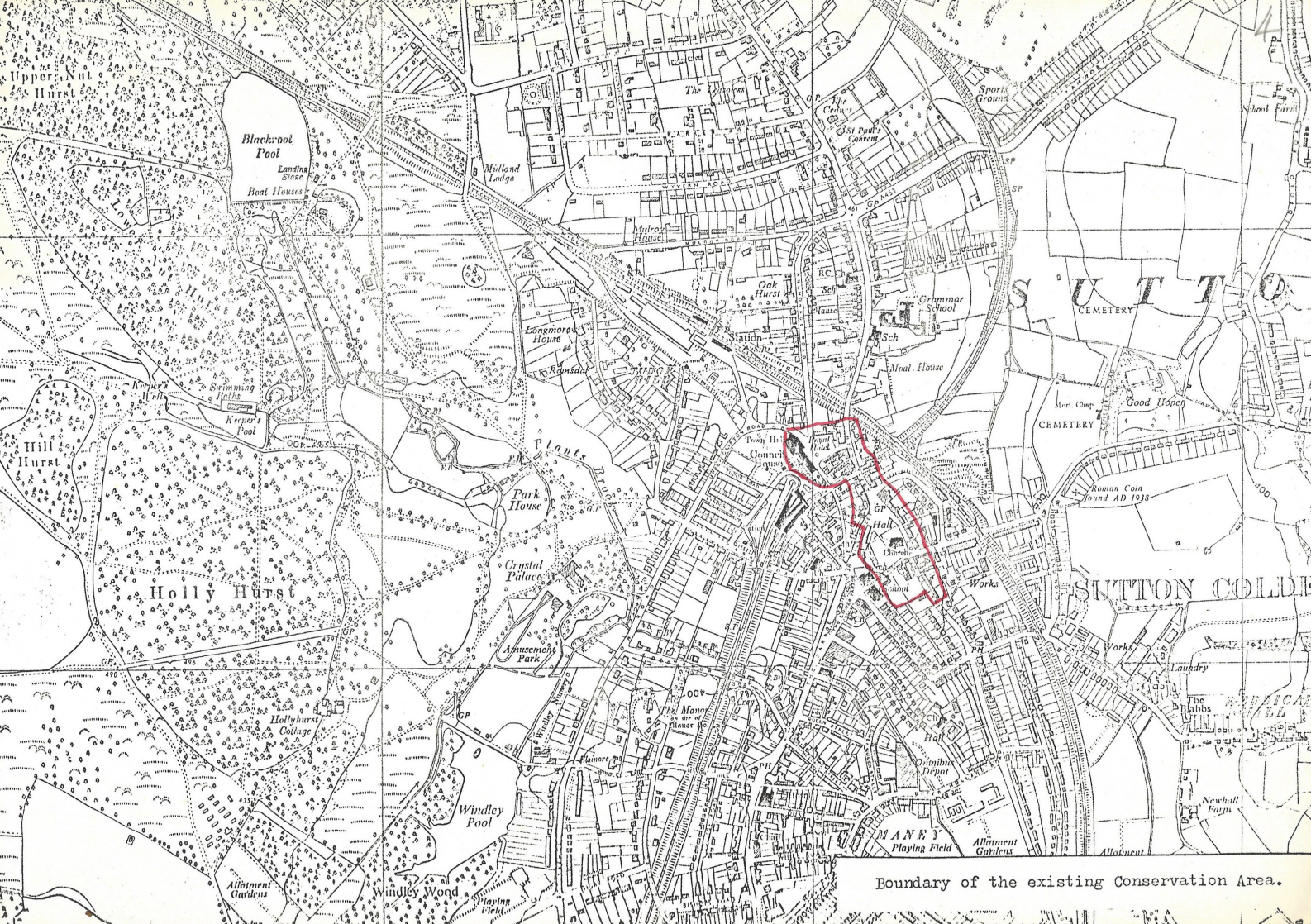
There is no indication of urban status for Sutton in Domesday Book; rather it appears as a substantial rural settlement engaged in arable farming. Its population in 1086 comprised 20 villani, 4 bordari (or 24 households) with 2 slaves. Using the multiplier of 5 a population of 120 may be suggested.

The town appears to have developed between Domesday and the early 14th century under the patronage of its lords, the Earls of Warwick. The parish church was started in the early 13th century whilst in 1300 the King granted to Guy de Beauchamp a weekly market on Tuesday and an annual fair on the eve and the feast of the Holy Trinity and the two days following.

Whether the Domesday settlement occupied the hill top around High Street is speculative. The 12th century Norman font in Holy Trinity and the two 12th/13th century carved stone heads re-set in the churchyard wall at the top of Church Hill might at first appear to suggest the earliest tangible evidence for settlement on the site. However all three features are ex situ. The font came from Over Whitacre church in the 18th century and the heads, in turn re-set from the demolished "Tythe Barn" in High Street, are said to have come from the chapel of St. Blaise in the Manor House on Manor Hill. Local writers have speculated that settlement grew up around the Manor House at Maney; some have cited the tradition that the parish church was intended to be built there rather than on Trinity Hill, but that at night spirits always carried away the stones to the present site. The earliest evidence for Holy Trinity so far revealed is architectural and is provided by early 13th century masonry in the chancel.

The town is situated in a commanding position on a spur of land some 400 feet above sea level. Lichfield Road, High Street and Coleshill Street follow the line of the spur, until it drops steeply down Trinity Hill to the Ebrook or Plant's Brook, which was dammed to form the medieval millpond. The nucleus of the medieval town was the junction of the important road from Worcester to Lichfield (Birmingham Road) which is marked on the early 14th century Gough Map in the Bodleian Library, and the road to Coleshill. In the triangular open space formed at this junction, in post-medieval times at least, the market was held around and beneath the Moot Hall erected by Bishop Vesey. None of the published accounts of Sutton have used medieval documentation such as land Charters which could throw light on the nature of the medieval town. It is possible that the Warwick Castle archives, now in the Warwick County Record Office, contain early documentation relating to the town.

The available evidence for medieval Sutton is therefore extremely unsatisfactory, being both fragmentary and speculative.



Boundary of the existing Conservation Area.

The Conservation Area

The historic town centre of Sutton, based on High Street and Holy Trinity church was designated as a Conservation Area by the then Warwickshire County Council in November 1973. According to Pevsner High Street is "the one street where Sutton Coldfield still is a town with a past". The character of the Conservation Area is basically formed by a series of 18th century town houses, interspersed with one or two earlier and many later buildings. The Georgian houses are two or three storeys high and built of brick with sandstone dressings, some with parapets and angle pilasters. The ground floor details of several have been destroyed by shop fronts and fascias.

The boundary of the Conservation Area follows the spur from No. 56 High Street immediately south of the railway bridge, as far as No. 63, Coleshill Street. The railway line, cut in 1879, now marks a visual break between the old part of the town to the south and modern development to the north, although a number of old buildings based on The Moat House still survive in the northern area. The Conservation Area approximates to the historic town centre, although those areas like Mill Street where the early buildings have been rebuilt or severely disfigured, were excluded.

Within the Conservation Area there are 48 buildings listed as having special architectural or historic interest, 25 being in the High Street itself, 5 in Old Bank Place, 17 in Coleshill Street and 1 in Mill Street.

The external appearance of these buildings, certainly from street inspection, rarely gives an accurate indication of their true age; just occasionally a stone gable protrudes to indicate an earlier core to which more recent facades have been added. The lists compiled

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by the Department of the Environment inspectors are of necessity generally based on external inspection only. Recent investigation has demonstrated just how misleading this approach can be. Nos 57 - 59 Coleshill Street, described as "19th century red brick", had been included in the list for their group value, whereas in reality they comprise a late medieval timber-framed hall-house retaining an important feature in its smoke hood. Presumably the unpromising street elevation of No. 34, High Street, precluded its inclusion, although once inside one realises that the facade conceals a 16th century town house.

Since 1977 Messrs. Dillon, Molyneaux, Willmott and Price have been investigating the buildings of the Conservation Area as part of the City Museum's programme of fieldwork. Ten have been investigated in detail by measured survey, whilst a further six were examined on a more limited basis. In this way 16, or $\frac{1}{3}$ of the town's listed buildings, have been studied to date.

So far this work has revealed six stone houses of 16th century date of which only one, 1-3 Coleshill Street, was previously known. It is tempting to associate these houses with the building energy of Bishop Vesey in the early 16th century, but the association cannot as yet be proven. No domestic buildings earlier than c.1500 have so far been found within the Conservation Area. In 1941 Chatwin and Harcourt suggested that the cellars of The Three Tuns Inn might be earlier than the building above them. Their suggestion appears to have prompted the local claim in the 1960s that the cellars are medieval, and even more recently that they are Saxon! A site visit in 1979 confirmed that the cellars contain ashlar foundations but at present there seems no reason to believe that this work pre-dates the 18th century inn. An ogee-shaped wooden doorhead of 14th century date was recorded in 1977 ex-situ from its original position at Nos 4 - 8 Lichfield Road, just north of the railway, but beyond the Conservation Area. Admittedly it is possible that further investigation might reveal an earlier survival, but for the time being at least our principal sources of information for the medieval town buildings of Sutton should be documentary and archaeological enquiries.

The Archaeological Implications of Development

Whilst the Conservation Area is largely protected from demolition and redevelopment there are already a number of vacant sites within it where old buildings have been demolished. Below are listed those areas presently vacant where it is suggested that the potential of archaeological investigation should at least be seriously considered. A number of opportunities have already been missed.

1. A focal point in the town bounded by Mill Street, Church Hill, Coleshill Street and the northern boundary of Holy Trinity's Churchyard was cleared of its 18th century buildings in 1938 to make way for the Vesey Gardens in 1939. How far landscaping disturbed the archaeology of the site is unknown.
2. 32, High Street was rebuilt c. 1971. The 16th century stone house on the site was destroyed without record and the opportunity for an archaeological watch was missed.
3. 35-41, Coleshill Street a modern block of flats was erected on this site at the corner with Rectory Road in the early 1970's.

The only archaeological work to date in the town centre has been the watching brief maintained by A.A. Round on the rebuilding of the graveyard wall of Holy Trinity in 1976.

The currently vacant sites are:

- (A) Site between No's 14-34 Mill Street, a wedge immediately north of the Gate Inn and backing on to Reddicroft. Just outside the existing Conservation Area*, but still within the

*Recent proposals by the City Planning Department have suggested that this area be included within the Conservation Area.



Vacant sites of archaeological importance.

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historic core. Occupied until c.1965 by two terraces of late 18th or early 19th century brick cottages of 2 storeys. A photograph in Birmingham Reference Library (WK/S17/8) taken c. 1900 does not appear to show cellar vents in the six bays visible in the photograph.

- (B) Site immediately north of 56 High Street. A triangular area bounded on the north by the railway line. On or near the site of "The Tythe Barn" or "Old Malt House", said to have been built by Vesey and demolished in 1879.
- (C) 15-17 High Street immediately north of Railway Road. No. 15 was occupied until the late 19th century by a range of two storey timber houses, probably of 17th century date. Before the cutting of Railway Road c.1862 the buildings continued in a southerly direction (site of No. 13). They are shown complete in the 1765 Moxhull Estate Survey when they belonged to Andrew Hacket. They comprised "Three Tenements" in a 4 or 5 bay terrace, four panels high in square framing with straight braces. The 1765 plan shows that the middle unit at least lay over a cellar as it marks "Cellar Stairs" to one side of the axial stack, whilst the elevation appears to show cellar vents in this section. The northern bay of this terrace is shown in a photograph of c.1870 of High Street which confirms the accuracy of the 18th century survey. No. 17 (Ennis House) a tall but narrow 3 storey and three bay brick house of 18th century date, with sash windows, stone cills and parapet. Demolished in 1971. The 1870 photograph shows the pedimented doorcase approached by three steps from the street and to one side a cellar light.
- (D) 21-25 High Street bounded by Clifton Street (formerly Cotton Lane or Alley) and King Edward's Square. An extensive range of buildings occupied the site as far west as the back road by the Council House. They comprised on the backland a wool

warehouse, converted sometime after 1880 into a laundry and more recently to a works for casting plaster moulds. Fronting the street was the Woolpack Inn with its brewhouse behind.

No. 21, a 2 bay 3 storey brick house with canted bay windows on the ground floor, later converted to a modern shop front. Sash windows above, pitched tiled roof and gable chimney. The 1870 photograph appears to show a cellar vent.

No. 23, a 2 bay 2 storey building, the northern bay projecting as a wing and possibly concealing earlier structures beneath. This wing was reduced in height and cut back flush with its neighbours between c.1855-88.

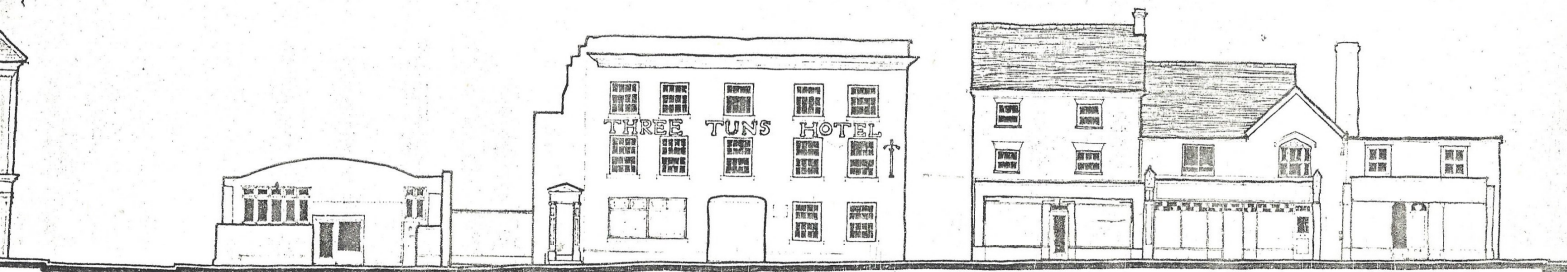
No. 25, 2 bay 2 storey brick building with end chimneys.

No's 21-25 were demolished in February 1977 without any record.

The existence of cellorage may have resulted in the destruction of stratification on the frontages and for this reason it is suggested that trial trenches should be cut through the site as a preliminary.



High Street, Sutton Coldfield, c.1870.



High Street, Sutton Coldfield, c.1965. Survey of street frontages
between Railway Road and King Edward's Square.

Summary & Recommendations

Whilst acknowledging that our present knowledge of the early history of the central area of Sutton Coldfield is inadequate and speculative, this report proposes that by archaeological investigation further light might be thrown on the origins of the town. There are currently four sites in the historic town centre where archaeological excavation should at least be considered before redevelopment. Of these four sites the two adjacent to the Three Tuns Inn are currently threatened by a proposed office development and archaeologically could be key sites in the town.

We recommend:

1. that the support of both the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society and the Sutton Coldfield Civic Society be sought for the proposal to undertake archaeological investigation in Sutton Coldfield.
2. that dependent on the response from these societies, the owners of the site adjacent to the Three Tuns Inn be approached for permission to carry out such work and for possible financial support.
3. that a report be submitted to the Leisure Services Committee of Birmingham District Council seeking permission to make a contribution to such excavation from the Museum and Art Gallery's excavation fund.