

Peopling the Past: Archaeology and Everyday Histories

Mike Hodder

We found many broken roof tiles in the archaeological excavation of a medieval park keeper's lodge in Sutton Park in 2021.¹ They are difficult to date closely: clay roof tiles like these were used on buildings in the Birmingham area by the 13th century² and they continued in use until much later. Pottery found at the lodge shows that it was occupied from the 15th to the early 17th centuries.³ The tiles tell us about the appearance of the building that stood there, and that its roof timbers must have been sufficiently robust to take their weight. They also connect us to the people who made them.



Some of the roof tiles found at the lodge, with lugs and peg holes. Copyright Mike Hodder

There is very little clay in Sutton Park itself, so the tiles were probably made outside it, possibly from the clay to the east of Sutton Coldfield which was used by potters in the 13th century.⁴ The majority of the tiles are flat.⁵ They were hung on the roof by a lug (a 'nib') which was formed before the tile was fired by pressing out the wet clay on one edge, with a thumb or finger, against a finger (or possibly a rounded stick) on the other side, which has left a groove under the nib.⁶

¹ R White, M Hodder, H Chapman, H Reynolds and D Smith (2022), *Excavations in Sutton Park, Birmingham, June 2021* (unpublished report, University of Birmingham); R White, M Hodder, H Chapman, H Reynolds and D Smith (2022), 'Birmingham, Sutton Park, medieval lodge', *West Midlands Archaeology* (Council for British Archaeology, West Midlands) 63, 141–42; I Trueman, M Poulton, M Hodder, L Large, S Hancock and S Phibbs (2023), *The Flora of Sutton Park* (Newbury: Pisces Publications), 106

² M Hodder, *Birmingham: the hidden history* (Stroud: Tempus 2004/ The History Press 2011), 120–121

³ References in footnote 1

⁴ M Hodder, 'Potters at Peddimore', <https://sclhrg.org.uk/research/original-research/2243-potters-at-peddimore.html>

⁵ We also found some pieces of ridge tiles, which were attached to the roof with pegs or nails inserted into a hole made before the tile was fired

⁶ C E Allin in J E Mellor and T Pearce (1981), *The Austin Friars, Leicester* (Council for British Archaeology Research Report 35), 65 https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-281-1/dissemination/pdf/cba_rr_035.pdf



How the lug and groove were formed, with thumb and finger. Copyright Mike Hodder

Archaeology studies people in the past from the physical remains they have left behind. Sometimes we find the people themselves– the analysis of human skeletons can reveal their age, health, lifestyle, where they lived, and even family relationships– but more often we are looking at the inanimate structures and objects that they built, made, and used. The impressions on these tiles bring us as close as we can get to the forever anonymous and faceless tile maker (or his assistant).⁷

⁷ Thanks to Marian Baxter, whose fascination with the finger marks transformed the tiles from roofs on buildings to the people who made them, and thanks to Zoe Toft for reading a draft of this article