
Windows on the Past: Excavations at 9 St. Nicholas Place, Leicester

Roger Kipling

In 2003, ULAS conducted a major excavation at the heart of the Roman and medieval town in advance of the construction of new premises for BBC Radio Leicester and the Asian Network.

Preliminary evaluation work in 2002 involved trenching in the cellars of a standing 19th century warehouse, revealing two major phases of building activity dating back to the 1st century AD and the earliest phase of the Roman town, with walls surviving to a height of c.0.5m. The discovery of mortar floors associated with possible masonry column bases (stylobates) suggested the presence of a monumental Roman public building, as expected of a site in close proximity to the forum, as well as domestic mud brick structures that had apparently been destroyed by fire.

Right: Aerial view across the excavation, showing the undercroft and, beyond, the Guildhall



Above: Recording the interior face of one of the windows of the undercroft.

Following demolition and clearance of the Victorian buildings in early 2003, excavation over the ensuing months revealed extensive and well-preserved medieval domestic and industrial structures dating to the 14th and 15th centuries. The northern area was dominated by a well-constructed masonry building once fronting the present High Street, the rear wall of which included a possible window and a doorway opening onto a yard area of successive cobbled surfaces traversed by covered drains. Attempts had been made to counter subsidence of the building into earlier pits by the construction of internal buttresses against the rear wall, the subsequent burial of the building beneath a substantial depth of demolition materials preserving the wall to over a metre in height. This area was also characterised by a number of circular masonry structures, possibly acting as base supports for watertanks associated with brewing or the dyeing of cloth.

The southern sector of the excavation, fronting onto Guildhall Lane, produced some of the most remarkable results, dominated by the (re) discovery of a rare undercroft building of probable 12th century date, first observed in 1844 when its (probably timber) first-floor hall superstructure was demolished. Constructed from granite and salvaged Roman brick and tile, the building comprised a partially sunken rectangular box measuring around 8.5m x 4.5m and 2.5m deep, the cutting of which entailed the removal of substantial accumula-

tions of successive Roman gravel street surfaces. The structure was lit by four splayed, round-headed windows, their arches formed by reused Roman brick and tile, whilst a row of niches set into the opposite wall are likely to have accommodated candles or lamps. Undercrofts are often associated with mercantile activity, in which case this example may have functioned as a store-room and, possibly, premises for trading of goods such as cloth, wool or food-stuffs by its wealthy merchant owner. The probable presence of a corner doorway would have afforded access for clients from the present Guildhall Lane.



Right above: The Norman undercroft photographed in 1861



Right below: The same view in 2003

A series of well-constructed stone-lined rubbish pits were ranged along the northern boundary of the same parcel of land. The recovery from their fills of artefacts such as a pottery sherds of a rare 15th century type manufactured in Lincoln and a bone comb fragment indicate that this property continued to be occupied by wealthy residents into later medieval period.

Visitors to the new BBC Radio Leicester premises, due to open in late 2004, will be able to view the undercroft beneath their feet through windows set into the floor of the new building.
