

# Southampton French Quarter 1382

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### The Southampton French Quarter Excavation

Southampton was one of England's leading medieval ports. During the 13th century, and again during the 15th century, its trade in major commodities such as wine, wool and cloth made it one of the most prosperous and cosmopolitan towns in the country. From the later 16th century, however, much of the international trade was lost to other ports (principally London) and Southampton suffered a long decline, until its fortunes revived with the growth of passenger trade to America in the mid 19th century.

During the Second World War the city suffered devastating bombing, and here, as elsewhere, post-war reconstruction paid little regard to the historic character of the old town. Medieval property plots were widened or ignored, building heights increased, and the construction of the Castle Way inner ring-road during the 1950s sliced through the medieval gridded street pattern.

In 2006 Oxford Archaeology were appointed by CgMs Consulting, acting on behalf of Linden Homes Southern, to carry out an excavation in advance of the construction of apartment blocks in the medieval 'French Quarter' of Southampton. The site covered approximately 0.5 ha, bounded to the west and east by the historic frontages of French St and the High St (formerly English St), where an impressive sequence of medieval vaulted cellars still survives. Excavation was carried out within the entire footprint of the development and included all areas subject to below-ground impact, such as crane base foundations and service redirections.

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The excavations revealed pits and structures of late Saxon to 12th-century date, apparently forming part of a rapidly developing but loosely structured settlement. In the 13th century the whole area had been laid out anew, on a formal grid pattern. The excavations revealed the thoroughfares and tenement boundaries of the 13th century, defined by the medieval and later cellar walls, that had largely survived from this time until 1950, when the bombed and ruinous post-war site was cleared and developed.

The long-term fossilisation of the property boundaries (see site plan below for the tenement outlines and number designations) has allowed us the opportunity to correlate the structural history of the site with artefacts and environmental evidence from nearly one thousand 13th- to 19th-century backyard pits, cisterns and latrines, and with the wealth of documentary resources for the area. A wide range of finds includes exotic and rare pottery and glass imports, a firing mechanism for a 14th-century crossbow, and the stock of a 1940s chemist's shop that fell into the medieval cellar below as a result of wartime bombing. The whole assemblage will provide a massive demographic dataset.

The constraints inherent in the traditional publication of such a large excavation commonly means that many years pass between the excavation and public accessibility of any of the excavation results and also that many of the specialist reports that inform publication are summarised and only survive as hard copy archive reports available only from the museum receiving the site archive or on microfiche (and more recently) on CD packaged with the publication. The Southampton excavation has produced some interesting assemblages that would benefit from being rapidly and easily available and so are presented here.

In downloading these reports users must accept the caveat that ongoing analysis may mean that some changes to the period/date allocations of the material may be made prior to full publication of the excavation.

The full 'hard' publication of the French Quarter site is programmed for completion in 2010.

**Richard Brown**  
**Senior Project Manager**  
**Oxford Archaeology**





Figure 1: Site plan