

Southampton French Quarter 1382

Specialist Report Download E8: Worked wood

By Damian Goodburn

The site lies in the historic core of Southampton a well-known historic port and some of the finds illustrate its maritime and international connections. Comments made here are made on the basis of familiarity with the huge corpus of material excavated in the London region, dating from the Bronze Age to the 19th century.

Methodology

The bulk of the worked wood was small and falls into the category of ‘small find ‘ rather than structural woodwork. This material was cleaned, examined, measured and then briefly described in an annotated wood list on waterproof film. A simplified version of the wood list is presented below as a summary record of the material with extra comment for key items. Some of the material proved not to be wood but compressed peat, or lime that had taken on a timber grain pattern. The latter material was discarded. Other material proved to be charcoal, sub samples of which were retained. Small abraded wood chips and fragments of roundwood were sampled for Sp ID where appropriate, and then discarded. Larger pieces of worked wood that might possibly have some potential for display were re packaged after recording. The larger items were drawn to scale in detail and the clearly structural timbers where also described on ‘timber sheets’.

16 bags of material were examined a total of 33 separate items in all. The general approach used would be broadly commensurate with the English Heritage Waterlogged Wood Guidelines.

Table 1 List of lifted wood

Context	Small Find No.	Comments	Tenement	Context Phase
1060		Blob of compressed peaty matter not wood	173	AN
1364		1 small dried out oak chip	174	PMED
3132		Large frags of charred pole, ¼ section 60mm across. Oak (quercus sp)	237	LMED
3167		Short cylinder of iron stained wood 50mm long by 70mm Dia. Possible central Fe nail hole.	237	PMED
3168		3 frags of lime mortar with wood grain impressions	237	PMED
3213		2 frags charcoal (Pomoideae (Hawthorn group).	237	LMED
4817	150	10 abraded items, 6 roundwood frags; Hazel or Birch (Corylus avellana L.Betula sp), 4 small oak chips	175	HMED
5073		3 small frags of lime mortar with wood grain impressions	180	PMED
7576		4 frags, carbonised roundwood 10mm dia. Pomoideae (Hawthorn group)	167	AN
7406 A		Elm disk with central nail 225mm dia 10mm thick (see below)	170	EMOD
7406 B		Oak wedge 210mm long by 100mm 40mm thick (see below)	170	EMOD

Context	Small Find No.	Comments	Tenement	Context Phase
7406 C		Sawn softwood off-cut, 0.47m long, 65mm wide by 32mm thick.	170	EMOD
7406	290	Jointed oak beam in well frame see below L 0.85m, 260mm wide by 170mm thick.	170	EMOD
7406	291	Tightly curving oak beam c. 1.22m on the diagonal 300mm wide by c.150mm thick. Jointed both ends.	170	EMOD
7406	292	As above, other half of same log	170	EMOD
8029	306	Carbonised base of turned cylinder 50mm dia by 15mm high	242	LMED

Comments

A circular elm disk: 7406A (Tenement 170 - EMOD)

This item would appear to have been some form of lid for a small tub or large jar. The possibility that it was a lid to a small toilet seat might also be considered!

An oak wedge: 7406B (Tenement 170 - EMOD)

A small crudely axe shaped wedge was found in this well fill made from an oak off-cut. The axe used had a nicked edge. This sort of wedge could be used for many purposes such as splitting logs to wedging doors or chocking up structural timbers.

A dense exotic 'softwood' off-cut: 7406C (Tenement 170 - EMOD)

A plank off-cut was found, covered in fresh manual saw marks and crude axe marks. It was also pierced by a small corroded iron nail indicating some sort of origin in a roughly made structure. What was really of interest about this off-cut was actually the raw material, which appeared to be some sort of dense sub-tropical 'pitch pine' type timber. Pitch pine (Long leaf yellow pines) is a group of dense rot resistant pines from the SE USA -Caribbean region. It was much used in 19th century nautical woodwork and joinery in Britain.

A charred turned cylinder base from 8029 (Small find 306) (Tenement 242 LMED)

This item was perfectly round with concentric turning rings and centre marks. The splitting marks followed the rays in the timber showing that it had been turned out of a section of pole, goblet fashion with the heart in the middle rather than made from a split log section. It is likely that this was a tough smooth grained wood such as birch or box. It must have been the base of some form of cylindrical container or canister.

A substantial well foundation frame of three timbers (Tenement 170 - EMOD)

It is clear that three oak timbers 7406: Small find No.s 290, 291 and 292 would still refit to form a horse shoe shaped frame c. 1.42m by 1.3m wide. Timber frames of curved elements used as foundation sills for wells of stone or brick are well known structures in London and elsewhere. The form of the assemblies varies. They were often cut out of three to four straight grained planks or beams. In the case of this Southampton example the beams are c. 170 mm thick oak up to 300mm wide. Two are strongly curved beams (small finds - 291 and 292) in which the grain follows the shape and the third a short length of straight timber. The curved beams were c. 1.22m on the diagonal and were tenoned into the straight timber: 7406 (small find 290). The joint was locked in place with pairs of 18mm oak pegs. Their other ends were slotted and an oak free tenon was slipped in and double pegged in both. This is a solid

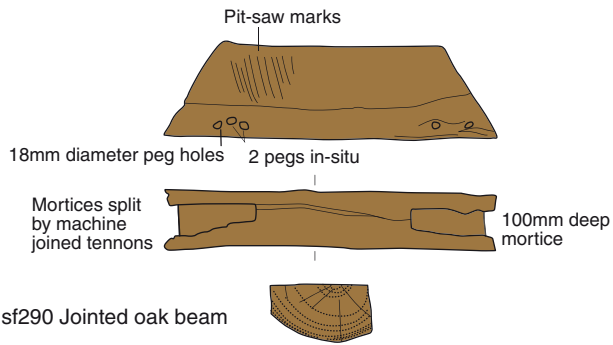
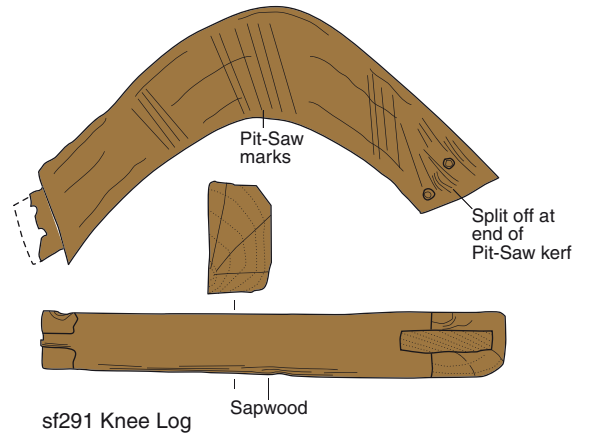
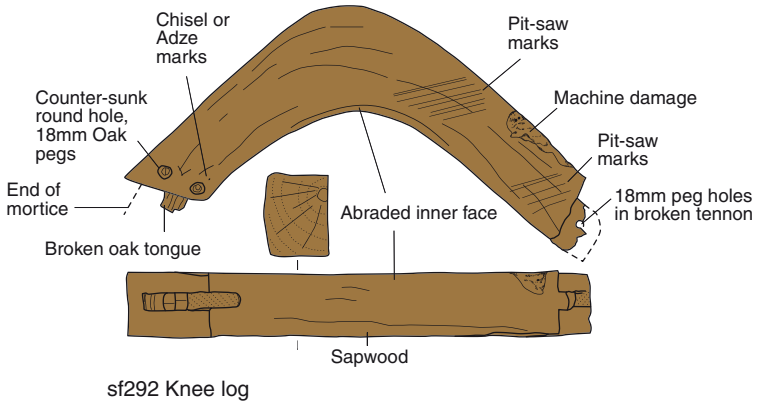
coherent well base (or possibly head?) frame. There is no sign that the timbers were reused from a ship or any other structural use, the faces were clearly rather fresh when first exposed., the sapwood shows no sign of earlier decay or borer damage. However such timbers were widely used as brackets or 'knees' in ships to reinforce the joins, typically between cross beams and the vessels sides. These timbers show no signs of the necessary trimming or fastening holes, which would indicate that they had been used. However, they are very likely to have been prepared and stock piled for use as ship knees. Presumably the carpenters who made the well frame bought the timbers from a near by shipyard. Such crooked oak is normally derived from open grown trees.

Dating

The woodworking technology of pit-sawing combined with hewing off the bark and most of the sapwood was common place between c. 1500 and the end of the 19th century so it is not closely datable. The solid condition of the timber and associated pottery however does suggest a late 18th to early 19th century dating for the frame. By coincidence this author has just assisted with the recording of a large group of 18th century ship knees in Dublin many of which were worked in the same way as the curved timbers of this frame.

Clinker ship nails

Evidence of clinker ship or boat building was retrieved near by in the form of a strip of three conjoined unused rectangular roves (see Specialist Download Report F6). The roves were used with iron nails to form a rivet used in ship and boat building mainly to hold the overlapping edges of clinker planking together.



Timbers from Well Foundation frame

