

## **Big Lea Green Yeoman Farm, Sutton, St Helens**

In 2002 the construction of a regional distribution centre by Somerfield plc provided an opportunity for archaeologists from Liverpool Museum to excavate and survey a late medieval and post-medieval farm at Lea Green, near St Helens. Documentary research had already established the occupation of Big Lea Green Farm during the late 17th-century by Bryan Lea, 'yeoman of Sutton', and it probably corresponded to lands held by Thurstan de Standish in the 14th-century. The archaeological evaluation identified single sherds of pottery dating from the 13th/14th-century. The continuous habitation of the site was briefly interrupted in September 1940, when the farmhouse was badly damaged by German bombing.

The medieval occupation of the site was attested to by a small assemblage of pottery from the 13th-century onwards, which was present as a residual component throughout the sequence. Structures from this period were largely truncated by later redevelopment of the site. The earliest post-medieval deposits were a series of 16th-century pits containing waterlogged material including horn, leather, animal hair, antler, well preserved seeds and wood fragments.

A large stone-built cellared-farmhouse, barns and a coach house were built in the 17th-century associated with several ditches reflecting a re-organisation of the farm. An associated enclosure ditch was later backfilled prior to 1720 with a large assemblage of domestic pottery including residual 'Cistercian' wares and local coarse earthenwares.

The 18th and early 19th centuries saw only relatively minor changes to the complex, with re-modelling of one of the barns in brick and the construction of a number of drains. Domestic pottery continued to be deposited into a garden soil behind the farmhouse. Between 1826 and 1849 a wide shallow ditch was excavated defining the south-west corner of the farm. This ditch had the appearance of a medieval moat, but proved to be a 19th-century ditch/landscape feature.

The farm was transformed during the late 19th-century (1847-1891) with the reconstruction of the farmhouse in brick, the addition of a stable block to a barn, a new open-sided 'Dutch' barn, the laying/relaying of cobbled yards and the re-organisation of an adjacent enclosure into a kitchen garden.

The farm underwent only superficial modification during the early 20th century, with alterations to the façade of the farmhouse. The farm house was badly damaged by a bomb dropped in September 1940, and was subsequently demolished and replaced by a brick-built farmhouse which shifted the principal access to the complex until its demise in 2002.

During the course of the excavation an exceptional collection of ceramics was recovered: dating from the 13th to the late 19th-century, the post-medieval pottery forms an especially rich assemblage which will provide a benchmark for future work in the area. A detailed description and discussion of the

ceramics is included below. A regionally significant clay pipe assemblage has been recovered and analysed in addition to horn, bone, and environmental material. The project demonstrated the potential for excavation of smaller yeoman farmsteads which were key components of the late and post-medieval rural landscape in the region and are rarely the focus of study.

The excavation has been published as the Journal of Merseyside Archaeological Society volume 14 (2012).

'A Yeoman Farm in St Helens: Excavations at Big Lea Green Farm, Sutton, 2002' by A. C. Towle and J. I. Speakman