

## History and Archaeology of The Forum, Norwich

The Forum is the Millennium project for the East of England. It is a striking example of 20th century architecture and a landmark in Norwich city centre.

The Forum is built on the site of the old Norwich Central Library which was devastated by fire in 1994, destroying many books and precious documents and forcing its closure.

Before build began on The Forum extensive archaeological investigations were carried out by Norfolk Archaeological Unity, with some exiting discoveries being made.

The site lies at the heart of an area known in The Middle Ages as The French Borough. The Borough was established as a colony of French traders after the Norman Conquest, between 1071 and 1075. The Forum site was the first major site to be excavated in the Borough and offered new evidence for the development of the western part of the historic centre of Norwich.

### Pre-Norman Activity

#### What was happening here before the Norman Conquest?

A priority of the excavation was to see if the French Borough was entirely new or if it had been built on earlier settlements. Prior to the excavation, it had been thought that this part of the city was essentially rural before the arrival of the Normans. However, the S-shaped streets making up part of the French Borough's street system were indicative of rural lanes and parallel ditches were also found aligned northwest to southeast across the site. Both pottery found in the ditches and their distinctive alignment suggests that they predated the new Borough. The function of the ditches is unknown, but it has been suggested that they may be late Saxon in date and represent divisions between plots of land or tenements. Late Saxon development is also known from other areas of Norwich, for example in King Street.

However, the best evidence for earlier occupation came from the most spectacular find – a small Viking gold ingot. This is the only gold ingot of its type yet discovered in England. Unfortunately, it was not found in an original layer but in a sand deposit used as bedding for an eighteenth-century floor and it was thought at the time of discovery that the ingot may have been brought from elsewhere, perhaps with the sand. However, several days later, a sherd of pottery crucible with gold residue adhering to its surface was found in a nearby pit. From the probable date of the pottery and the pit layer, it was therefore surmised that gold working was taking place here sometime during the Anglo-Scandinavian (860-917AD) or late Anglo-Saxon period (917-1066AD). This activity may be connected with one of the properties represented by the ditches.

## **Norman Activity**

### **Discoveries in the French Borough**

The French Borough itself was laid out from scratch and the churches of St Giles, St Stephen and St Peter Mancroft were established. St Peter Mancroft, adjacent to the east side of the site, was rebuilt in the fifteenth century and is the largest parish church in the city. New tenements were also laid out, for example along St Peter Street flanking the new market. However, it was not until the twelfth century that Bethel Street grew in importance. Two buildings on this street in particular must have been wealthy properties as they were built of stone and their discovery doubles the number of stone structures of this date known from Norwich. Other examples can be found preserved beneath the Magistrates Court and as part of the Music House on King Street.

A surprise discovery was that of a limekiln, fifty metres south of Bethel Street. This may have been connected with the construction of the stone houses although it is not possible to be sure as it is only roughly dated to between the late twelfth and fourteenth century. This is the earliest limekiln to have been discovered in Norfolk as all other examples are post-medieval at the earliest.

## **Medieval Activity**

### **The Forum area during the medieval period**

The high Middle Ages saw the heyday of the French Borough when it became the wealthiest area of the city.

However, the area around Bethel Street saw little development in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The southern and western parts of The Forum site were walled off by a flint and mortar wall and probably became part of the Hospital of St Mary in the Fields. This institution was established in 1248 and some of its buildings survive as part of the present-day Assembly House. The area within the walls themselves appears to have been used for some kind of gardening activity, perhaps an orchard or allotment.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a renewal of intensive activity at the site, mainly well and pit digging. Much of the evidence for structures from this period had been removed during construction of the original library building in the early 1960s. These were timber-framed buildings with insubstantial foundations and were therefore easily demolished.

## **Post-Medieval Discoveries**

### **Beginnings of the cloth trade**

The Hospital of St Mary was closed following the Dissolution of the Monasteries (c. 1538) and pit digging then also took place in this area, mainly for the quarrying of sand and gravels. Very significant amounts of Late-Medieval and Post-Medieval pottery were recovered from pits dating to this period.

During the Reformation, Norwich generally and this parish in particular became home to immigrants from the Low Countries, known locally as Strangers. Many of these people were employed in the cloth trade and evidence for this was recovered in the form of stone and timber-lined pits used as tanks and from a cellar floor containing the macrofossil remains of plants used in the dying process.