

15. ARTIFACTS SPEAK OF TIME AND SPACE

Distribution patterns of window glass, daub and nails provide clues to the layout of the house, and how the different areas were used.

Portable artifacts contribute to site interpretation from two aspects: spatial disposition of site features and social/historical interpretation of the people who lived there. Artifact distribution is as much a feature as if it were a brown stain in the soil. Together with soil chemistry, artifact locations can define functional zones within the site.

A study of individual artifacts can provide clues to intimate details about the lives of site occupants, and interpretation of each artifact or group of artifacts is essential to the story-telling aspect of site interpretation. Site reports traditionally give prominence to the taxonomic recounting of a site's artifacts, with distribution and story-telling added as if an afterthought. Our approach has been to integrate artifact discussion with site activity discussion, while maintaining the taxonomic system of report organization as much as possible, so long as it does not get in the way of the primary task of telling the site's story.

At Bloomsbury, in the absence of trash pits and architectural remains, we were obliged to interrogate the plowzone artifacts for intrasite geographical information normally provided by deeply buried remains. The surface artifact catalogue was fed into a computer spreadsheet, which was then mapped using the MacGridzo™ program.

Distribution maps, taken in the aggregate, define activity areas and limits of the toft enclosure. The second step in artifact analysis was a detailed study of each ware type, identification of individual vessels, and further mapping of the surface units that yielded parts of the more notable vessels.

In spite of the fact that the site was dug completely, the number of relatively complete vessels was surprisingly small.

Because there were no trash pits, many ceramic and glass items were discarded on the surface, where they were pulverized beyond recognition during nearly two centuries of cultivation. A few vessels that were dropped down the well were incompletely recovered because of safety considerations; both wells were evacuated before their lowest deposits could be emptied in an orderly fashion

A few vessels from pit features were represented by enough sherds to allow identification of distinct vessels, or to allow an educated guess at the minimum number of vessels represented. The few recognizable vessels were assigned numbers and are discussed here as individual pieces.

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION

Because there were scant subsurface evidences of the house(s), the distribution of artifacts within the plowzone became the potentially most powerful tool for interpreting domestic space.

A burnt patch (Feature 43) near the north end of the site was interpreted as a place that had been heated many times, most likely a hearth. If we assume that the burnt patch was a hearth, it should be expected to mark either the center or one end of a house.

Since our research indicated that wells typically were sited within a few feet of the house they served, we considered it logical to look for house evidence between the wells and the burnt spot, an area with few significant features. On the following pages are maps of the artifact occurrences in the sifted five-foot topsoil units.

ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE

The most striking correlation of artifacts and features was the location of just four artifacts. Four faceted wire-wound blue

glass beads were found in the plowzone, their findspots describing a rough rectangle, as large as twenty by twenty feet, with one corner near the burnt spot. A fifth specimen was found in the west well.

In addition to the interesting bead distribution, nails, window glass, and burnt daub offered clues to the location(s) of the house or houses. Window glass was clustered around the south side of the burnt spot, suggesting that a house with glazed windows stood there, identical with, or adjacent to, the putative house outlined by the blue beads.

Nails and burnt daub, which may be considered architectural artifacts, were concentrated on the perimeter of the supposed house area.

The distribution maps on the following pages provide further clues to the location of the house(s). There appears to be a

“barrier” or division line between the east and west sides of the site. This line runs roughly from the burnt spot to the wells. Refined wares were concentrated west of this line (Figure 104), as was porcelain (Figure 106). Some wares were concentrated east of the line, which was the case with clear lead-glazed red earthenware (Figure 107).

If the barrier dividing the site was the house or succession of houses, the western concentration may be identified as the domestic activity area. One might even suggest that the first house lay southwest of the burnt patch and that a later house or wing stood to its east. The division or barrier apparently has some temporal and functional significance, as demonstrated in the comparisons shown in figures 104 through 107. It appears that a later culinary function area was established near the east well, and that the earlier food preparation activities occurred to the west.



Figure 101
Scraping for the big picture

On April 7, 1995, the crew cleared the east block, revealing a burnt patch and related features. The east well is at left. See Figure 55, page 137, for a sketch site plan of that date. The square at left was being opened at this time.