

COVENTRY'S MEDIEVAL SUBURBS

EXCAVATIONS AT HILL STREET,
UPPER WELL STREET AND
FAR GOSFORD STREET

2003-07

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1. Introduction

Project background

Hill Street, Upper Well Street and Far Gosford Street are located at opposite ends of the walled medieval city, 1.2km apart (NGR: SP 3292 7917 & SP 3313 7927; SP 3420 7888 respectively; Fig 1.1). In each case these sites lie close to the modern ring road, but at the inner end of the medieval thoroughfares, in the lee of the late medieval defences.

The significance of the sites in the study of Coventry's archaeology is that they lie in very similar locations relative to the city and that they comprise three suburban streets which stood directly outside the city gates for much of the medieval period. Such similarities facilitate ease of comparison in terms of land planning, construction methodologies, character and relative fluctuations in the long-term economy of the suburbs. It also serves to highlight what differences there were, if any, between the experiences and economies of properties within the city walls (such as excavated at Much Park Street 1970-74, Broadgate 1974-5 and Derby Lane 1982-4) and those here which were excluded by the construction and operation of those defences in peace and war. In terms of the material assemblages, the site also had the potential to highlight differences in the focus of a variety of trades and industries.

Hill Street/Upper Well Street and Far Gosford Street sites contain substantial portions of the city's defences, never before looked at in such detail. The new data is of great value in comparing the results with those previously gained from a variety of smaller sites such as King Street and Lamb Street 1960, Godiva Street 1970, Cox Street 1976-8, Friars Road 1990, The Cheylesmore 1991 and Hill Street 2002-3. The work has, in some detail, married up excavated data and documentary sources for the working of the defences over a period of 250 years.

For the first time, the immediate suburban environment has come under scrutiny and an unprecedented level of botanical data has come to light in a programme of sampling for both seeds and pollens as a guide to the changing character of the streets.

The margins of the medieval city are a fertile place to look in principle, since they have not been overly developed since the medieval period. Therefore they stand to retain greater quantities of early environmental remains, less likely to be present in the busier city centre. Thus, forming a circuit around the massively redeveloped centre, they have a potential to tell us far more about the early city environment in which Coventry grew.

Northamptonshire Archaeology, now part of MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology), undertook the

excavations over 2003-7. Preliminary work in advance of development for the Belgrave Plaza at Hill Street took place in stages comprising an evaluation (Thorne 2003), three watching briefs (Mason *et al* 2005; Mason *et al* 2006; McAree 2006a) and two excavations (McAree and Mason 2006; Mason and Soden 2007). A full client report was written bringing together the results of these excavations (Mason *et al* 2008). Work at Far Gosford Street took place prior to the construction of Callice Court (private accommodation for Coventry University). Initial archaeological work comprised an archaeological evaluation by ULAS (Richards 2006), a palaeoenvironmental survey (Head and Wilkinson 2006), a report on the coin hoard (Mason and Soden 2006) and these were followed by an excavation by MOLA Archaeology (Mason and Soden 2008).

At Belgrave Plaza the work was funded by Oakmoor Deeley and managed by Rose Project Services, while at Far Gosford Street work was carried out by UNITE Integrated Solutions plc and managed by University of Leicester Archaeological Services. Both sites fell under the auspices of Coventry City Council's Conservation and Archaeology Section who monitored on behalf of the Planning Authority.

Topography and geology

The Hill Street and Upper Well Street sites constituted a surface car park, bounded by Upper Well Street to the north-east, Bond Street to the south-east, Hill Street to the south-west and the new Belgrave Plaza car park to the north-west (formerly known as Leigh Mills). The site lay at c. 81m above Ordnance Datum. The Radford Brook, a tributary of the River Sherbourne (itself a tributary of the Warwickshire Avon) flows through a culvert beneath the modern ground surface and crosses between the two excavated areas on an approximate south-east to north-west alignment. The mapped geology of the site is Keuper Marl, stiff red clay of the Triassic Enville Beds. This overlies distinctive coarse-grained red sandstone, which in turn seals Carboniferous coal seams (BGS 1984).

The Far Gosford Street site comprised the historic frontage of Far Gosford Street and a portion of the properties which once stretched back as far as Gulson Road to the south. To the immediate west lies the course of the River Sherbourne, while to the east once flowed that of the Springfield Brook, a feeder stream, long since culverted below ground. The geology of the sites is Keele Series sandstones, siltstones and conglomerates, a sub-division of Carboniferous Upper Coal Measures, overlain by varying thicknesses of alluvium (Head and Wilkinson 2006, 7).

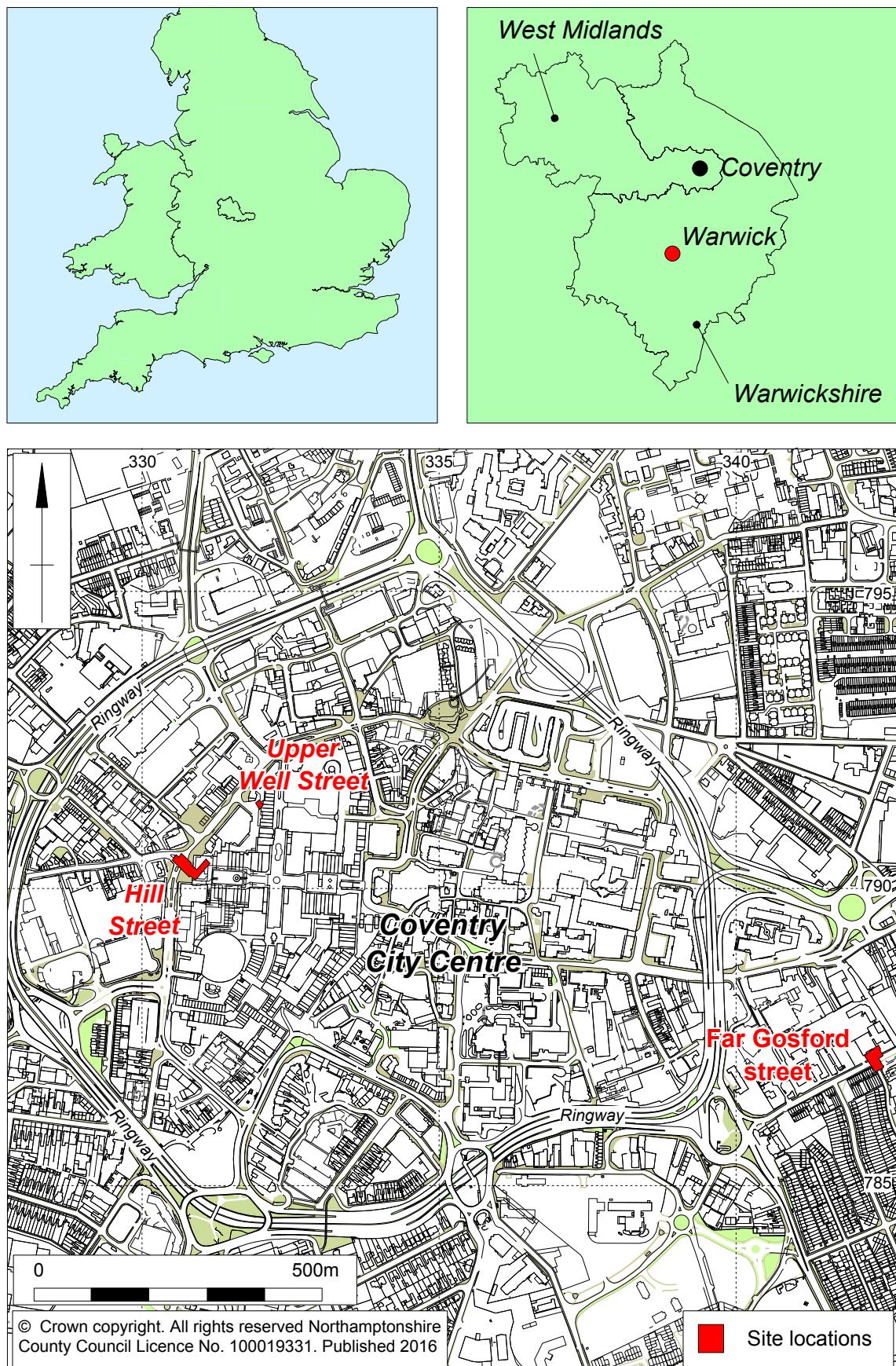


FIGURE 1.1: SITE LOCATIONS