

Blackpitts: Dublin's medieval tanning quarter

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INTRODUCTION

In 2004, an archaeological excavation took place at 48 New Street South, Dublin 8, in an area of Dublin known locally as 'Blackpitts'. The excavation identified over a hundred tanning pits dating from the late thirteenth to the seventeenth century. Back in the early 2000s, New Street was one of the largest and most extensive medieval leatherworking sites ever excavated in Ireland. Prior to this, archaeological evidence for medieval leatherworking had been either dumps of medieval leather objects, or individual small tanning pits. For example, the largest Irish deposit of medieval leatherworking evidence had come from Breandán Ó Ríordáin's excavations in the 1970s of a dump of waste at High Street in Dublin. This waste included shoe fragments dated to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, leather sheaths, scabbards and satchels (Ó Ríordáin 1976); however, no actual tanning pits were found. A large quantity of medieval leather – again mostly shoes – was excavated by Claire Walsh on Patrick Street and Winetavern Street in the early 1990s (O'Rourke 1997, 163–78). Similar dumps were excavated in Waterford (McCutcheon and Hurley 1997, 161).

The first definitive medieval tanning pit in Dublin was identified in 1990 (pit 11, site B in Walsh 1997, 39). This was a fourteenth-century oak-stave and stone-lined tanning pit on Patrick Street. In 1993 a late fifteenth-century 'tanning house' at Ship Street Little was excavated, with a rectangular timber pit and three barrels (Simpson 2004, 43). Shortly afterwards pits containing tanning waste at 44–9 New Row South were interpreted as being tanning activity dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century to the eighteenth or nineteenth century (Sally 1997, 11–13). In 2003, a number of what were possibly small medieval tanning pits were excavated on the Coombe (McQuade 2005).

The relatively limited archaeological evidence for medieval tanning before 2004 can be compared to the extensive evidence for late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanning complexes in Dublin 8, for example at Ardee Street (Myles 2005), James's Street (Bolger 2005) and Dolphin's Barn (Hayden 2002, 33–8) in the early 2000s. These eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanneries were large, industrialized and well organized, whereas the medieval tanning sites were small, relatively rare, and often isolated. This did not fit the evidence from documentary sources, which suggested that Dublin had a thriving leather-making industry in the thirteenth century and that

leather-making was an important medieval trade (O'Rourke 1997, 163; Webb 1929, 214).

Thus, the excavation of the large-scale medieval tanneries at New Street was significant, as the largest medieval leatherworking site excavated in Ireland, and indeed one of the largest in Ireland and Britain combined. As well as its size, the New Street site was also among the longest-lived leatherworking sites excavated in either Ireland or Britain, with evidence of continuous leatherworking dating from the late thirteenth to the late seventeenth century. In 2004, the only comparable published leather-making site was in the Greens in Northampton in England, excavated in the 1980s, which operated from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century (Shaw 1984; 1989; 1996).

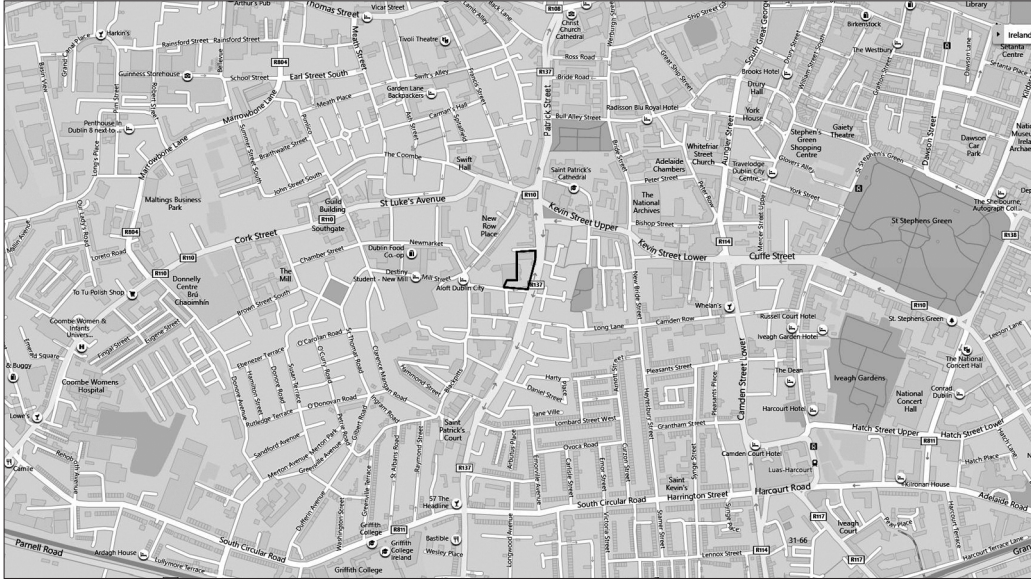
In the last few years, however, much more evidence for large-scale and long-lived medieval tanning has been revealed from excavations in Dublin 8, most notably at Thomas Street in 2017 (see Duffy, this volume, above). More evidence for medieval tanning is emerging from excavations at Dean Street in 2017 (Collins 2018) and Francis Street in 2019 (McIlreavy, pers. comm., 2019). While New Street is probably no longer the largest and longest-lived medieval tanning site in Ireland, the findings from the excavation have become more relevant as comparable material is being discovered elsewhere.

LOCATION

The New Street site was situated at the corner of New Street and Fumbally Lane, in Dublin 8, at no. 48 New Street, a decommissioned service station and garage (fig. 7.1). A large modern development called Cathedral Court – so called because of its proximity to St Patrick's Cathedral – now occupies the site. A smaller road running behind the site is called Blackpitts. Prior to the excavation at New Street, it was unclear if the name Blackpitts had been derived from tanning pits, or from mass graves following a medieval epidemic (Herity 2001, 44; Murtagh 1973, 48). The findings from the excavation now strongly suggest that the place-name derives from the pits of black smelly tanning-solution that are the subject of this contribution. Indeed, this quarter of Dublin may have been known as Blackpitts from late-medieval times, hence the title of this paper.

TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES

In the medieval period the site was situated next to Crosspoddle, which was the lowest point at which the river Poddle could be forded. Several important roads intersected here, and it was the location of an extramural gate and a medieval market (Clarke 1990, 57–8; McCullough 1989, 9; Manning 1998, 53).



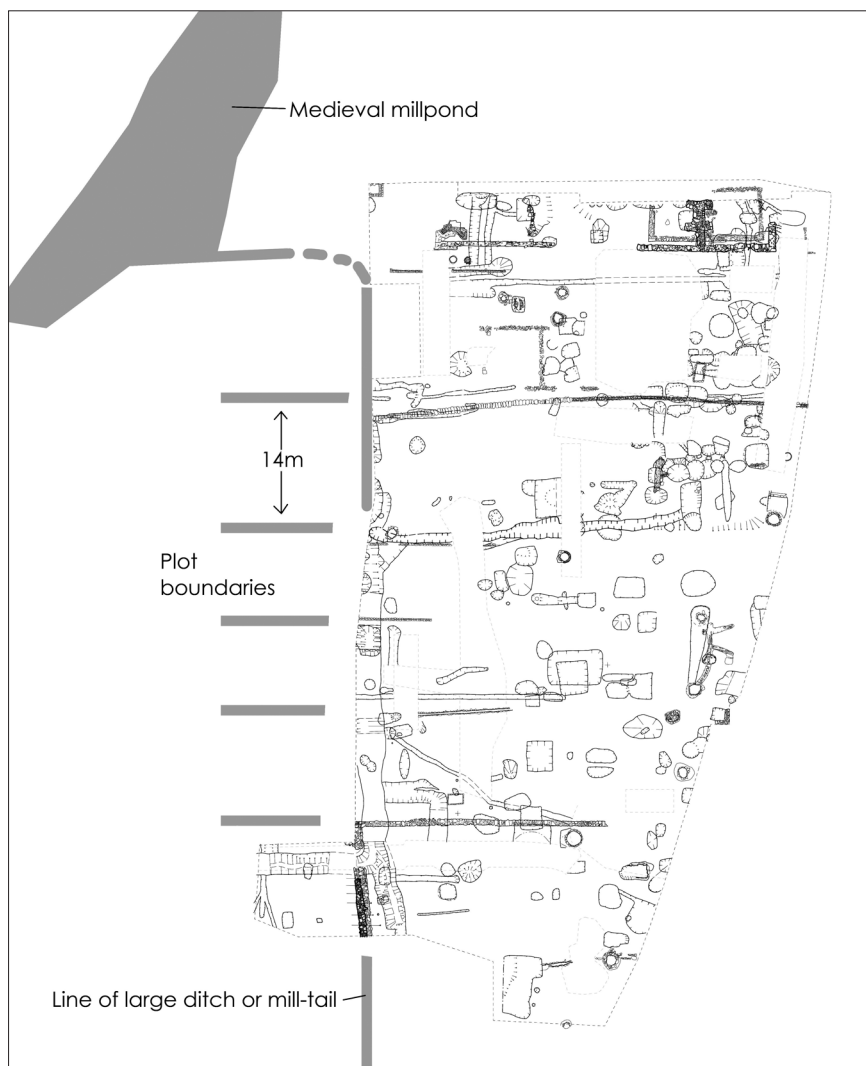
7.1 Site location

This area was already settled before the Anglo-Norman period: Crosspoddle may have held a number of pre-Anglo-Norman churches, and possibly formed an Irish suburb of the Hiberno-Norse town (Clarke 1998, 52; 1995, 92; McCullough 1989, 9, 14; Mills 1989, 31; Simpson 1997, 17).

There was no pre-twelfth-century material on the New Street site. The earliest archaeological evidence for activity was in the form of furrows and agricultural features, cesspits and drains. These would have been located behind houses on New Street and were dated to the late twelfth century and early thirteenth century, which is just after the Anglo-Norman capture of Dublin. In the thirteenth century Dublin expanded outside its Hiberno-Norse wall, and documentary sources record property plots along Thomas Street, Francis Street, Patrick Street and Kevin Street. New Street – 300m south of the city wall – is mentioned in documentary sources from 1218 (M'Cready 1982, 73).

PROPERTY BOUNDARIES

By the fourteenth century the character of the site had changed substantially. It was divided up into regular property boundaries defined by shallow ditches located 13–15m apart (fig. 7.2). The street-front of the property boundaries was missing as New Street had been widened, so there was no evidence on the site for medieval houses. Only the rear gardens or yards survived. These plot



7.2 Medieval plot boundaries and mill tail

boundaries, established in the late thirteenth century, were frequently cut and recut, and in later periods marked by walls, continuing in use all the way into the eighteenth century. Even when the medieval boundaries did not survive, clusters of tanning pits frequently respected their projected line.

Records of the medieval burgage plots laid out along Thomas Street, Bridge Street and James's Street indicate that the street frontage generally measured under 10m wide (Duffy 2001, 166–7), which is narrower than the plots at New

Street. However, the New Street plots are comparable to the 14m-wide burgage plots excavated at the medieval village of Saggart outside Dublin (McCarthy and Saunderson, pers. comm.), and perhaps reflect a suburban arrangement of plots just outside the walled town. Although the medieval property boundaries continued into use into the eighteenth century, they were subdivided. The properties in the northern half of the site were subdivided from the later medieval period, notably along one particular boundary which became a laneway, named from at least the eighteenth century as Swift's Alley. After 1640, evidence for plot subdivision was identified across the entire site, which probably reflects the boom in Dublin's population after the mid-seventeenth-century wars (Craig 1969, 86; McCullough 1989, 58). By the time of Roque's 1756 map, the medieval plot divisions line up with laneways separating groups of houses.

A POSSIBLE TAIL RACE

All the medieval plot boundaries drained into a large ditch that defined the rear of the properties, and which was constructed in or around the late thirteenth century. This ditch ran north to south and measured 2–3m in width and up to 2m deep. It was located on a logical topographical boundary point, running directly along the contour-line marking the high point of terrain that sloped steeply down the Poddle river valley behind the properties to the west. The ditch was filled in at the end of the medieval period, and the material within the ditch contained medieval pottery dating from the late thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries, and fragments of medieval floor-tiles with parallels at St Patrick's Cathedral, Christ Church, Winetavern Street and Meath Market. After it was backfilled, a wall was constructed along the top of it. This medieval ditch marked a property boundary that lasted 700 years and remains a property boundary today, forming the rear of the Cathedral Court development.

Late-medieval documentary records indicate that ditches were dug off the Poddle watercourse in order to serve tanneries, and legislation passed from the fifteenth century onwards often required that these be filled in due to the continuous flooding of the Poddle and contamination of the watercourse (Ronan 1927, 45). The New Street ditch was backfilled in the late-medieval period, at the same time as the tannery legislation, and the feature was initially interpreted as a ditch dug by the tanners to provide themselves with water and drainage. There is another possible function for the large ditch, however. A medieval millpond on the bank of the Poddle was excavated directly north-west of the New Street site (Lohan 1998, 45–6). The millpond was constructed in the thirteenth–fourteenth century and backfilled in the fourteenth–fifteenth century, which matches the dates for the construction and backfilling of the

New Street ditch. Based on the levels on the base of the ditch and its location, it does not appear to have functioned as a millrace, but it did run either into or out of the Poddle near the millpond, and may have functioned as a tail race or millpond overflow channel.

This ditch may have been part of a very large programme of waterworks carried out along the Poddle in the mid-thirteenth century, as the river was diverted around the liberties (Ronan 1927, 45; Joyce 1920, 452–3). Numerous mills, millraces and water channels were established along its new and old courses, and marked the edges of the liberties and ecclesiastical landholdings (Simpson 1997). Disputes about the mills and the watercourses that powered them are frequent in medieval texts, and in general involve monasteries and ecclesiastical manors (*ibid.*). Because the establishment of the New Street ditched watercourse – which was probably mill-related – could have been an essential component of the tanneries excavated at New Street, the question as to for whom the ditch was constructed is an important one: if the ditch was built as part of works associated with an ecclesiastical house, it is possible that the tanning quarter that subsequently grew up in this area was envisaged as part of that scheme.

TANNING PITS

Over one hundred tanning pits, or pits directly relating to leather-making, were excavated on the site, generally dating from the late thirteenth to the late seventeenth century. The latest two tanning pits, which were the only stone-lined pits, date to the start of the eighteenth century. The tanning pits were found in every plot and tended to be located in the eastern half of the plots, near the current New Street frontage. This would have been the location of the backyards of the original New Street buildings prior to the widening of the street. There was a concentration of pits in the north of the site in and around the laneway known as Swift's Alley. These pits respect the division of the site into property plots, and so the site should not be interpreted as a single tannery. Instead it must represent multiple tanners, perhaps living on New Street and working in their backyards or off lanes between groups of houses. In other words, a tanning quarter.

The most important discovery from the excavation is that there was almost no development or change in the tanning pits over time, either in their fills, shape, size, location or arrangement, from the medieval period to the seventeenth century. There is one exception: from approximately the sixteenth century onwards, there was a distinctive change in smell in the pits, and this might represent a change in the tanning-solution recipe, perhaps the use of a different wood either as a reaction to shortages, or technological progress. The only other observable change occurred at the very end of the eighteenth



7.3 Tanning pit – basic type

century. Only two pits **post-date the eighteenth century** and they were completely different in style from the pre-1700 pits, being stone-lined and rectangular.

Three distinct types of pre-1700 tanning pit (identified by function on the basis of tanning material in the fill) were identified on the site. The first type was the most common: the ‘basic’ tanning pit (fig. 7.3). These were located in clusters, or on Swift’s Alley in distinctive rows, of intercutting pits. Both circular and square pits were used in even ratios in every time-period and in almost every plot. They measured approximately 1–2m in width and 1m in depth. The basic tanning pit clusters were often associated with small drains that led from one side of a pit, and that could have regulated the level of water in the pits. Documentary sources suggest that this sort of pit was sometimes called a ‘handling pit’, where hides were swished around in progressively stronger solutions until they reached the right colour or level of tanning.

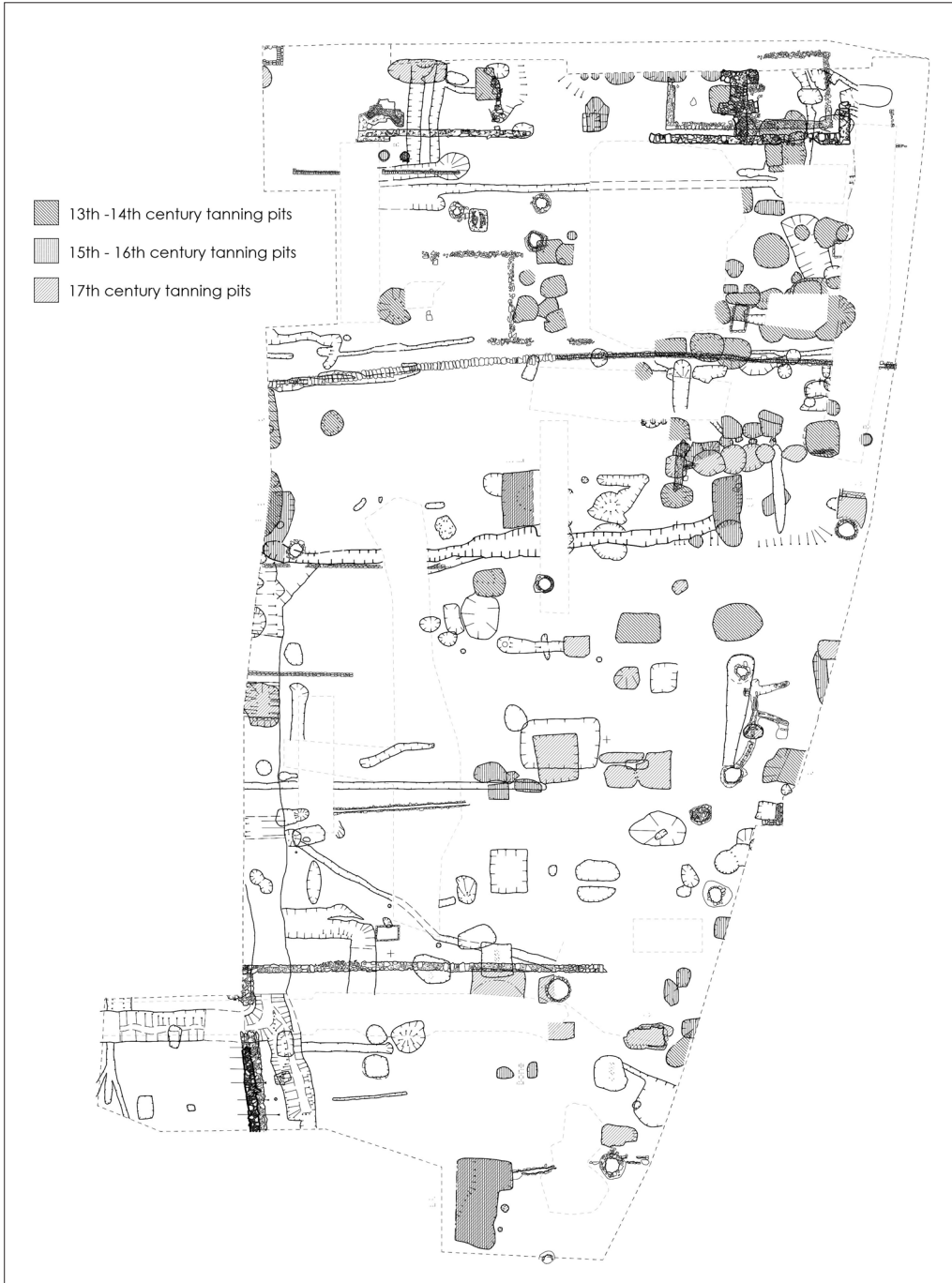
The second type was rarer, and comprised larger and deeper pits (over 2m in width and over 1m in depth), again with an equal ratio of circular and square shapes. These had different fills from the basic pits, and in some cases they were associated with specific processes such as de-hairing or long-term



7.4 Tanning pit – rinsing



7.5 Tanning pit – lining



7.6 Tanning pits phased

tanning (layaway pits). Some of these pits were very similar to medieval cesspits excavated at other sites, except for their fills, and it is likely that some of them may have started out as cesspits and were later used as tanning pits, or vice versa.

The third type of pit was broad and shallow, and these are interpreted as rinsing pits (fig. 7.4). These were always located at the plot boundaries and were directly associated with drains or ditches, presumably to provide a steady supply of water. One of these pits was associated with numerous postholes and stakes inside and around it, which may have supported a frame for laying out the hides for rinsing. These pits were found in every plot and in every time-period. One of the distinct differences between this type of pit and the previous two was that all the 'rinsing pits' had multiple phases of use, with evidence for their reuse over centuries, rather than the single-use tanning pits.

The tanning pits did not have clear evidence of lining. This was considered unusual in 2004, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanning pits generally have evidence for lining, but now that more medieval tanneries have been excavated in the last few years, the absence of lining evidence at New Street fits with similar evidence at other sites. At New Street there was some evidence for clay lining, and some evidence for timber lining on one or more sides (fig. 7.5), or more rarely stone lining on one or more sides, but this was not consistent. Several pits were excavated that were the same size and shape as tanning pits, and their bases had been stained with tanning-solution, but they contained no tanning material, which might possibly suggest that a lining had been removed in one piece after the pits were used. Overall, the thirteenth- to seventeenth-century tanning pits at New Street (fig. 7.6) displayed a variety of informal and temporary lining techniques, which is in contrast to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanneries in the Liberties.

ANIMALS AND BONES

The butchering and skinning of animals prior to tanning was represented on the site by the very large animal-bone assemblage. The animal-bone assemblage associated with tanning deposits was analyzed separately to that associated with non-tanning contexts. Tanning deposits were dominated by cow bones (38%), followed by sheep/goat (24%), calf (12%), pig (8%), kid (7%), horse (6%), piglet (5%), deer (2%) and foal (1%). Many of the animal-bones displayed evidence of butchery and skinning. The proportions were consistent for every phase from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries, with a slightly higher proportion of cow in the earlier (medieval) phases, and the difference generally being made up by a higher proportion of young animals in the post-medieval period. It will be interesting to compare these proportions to those from the recently excavated medieval tanneries at Thomas Street and

Dean Street to see if geographical specializations of leather tanning can be discerned. This would seem to be the case, based on early analysis of the Thomas Street bone (see Duffy above).

The hides of young animals, which were well represented on the bone assemblage from tanning contexts, could also be used for making vellum, which is a fine parchment used in the production of documents and books. The location of the site next to St Patrick's Cathedral might have encouraged a market for vellum. The percentage of juvenile animals rose over time: 15% in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, 20% in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and was highest at 22% in the seventeenth century. The largest relative quantities of juvenile animal-bone were concentrated in the two southernmost plots, which had the smallest number of definitive tanning pits, but which had multiple pits containing no leather artefacts, no leather cuttings, and no oak-bark chippings. It is likely that a specialist tanning process was carried out here involving juvenile animals, perhaps the manufacture of supple leathers, such as for gloves or slippers, rather than vellum, which in any case had generally been replaced by paper by the seventeenth century.

DE-HAIRING

The de-hairing process was represented at New Street, although not by the presence of the lime pits commonly found in excavations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanneries. Large fragments of limestone debris found at medieval tanning sites in the York area have been interpreted as relating to de-hairing using lime (MacGregor 1998, 15). While limestone rubble was also commonly found in the seventeenth-century tanning pits at New Street, it is more likely to have resulted from the demolition of nearby buildings used to backfill the pits.

Several of the excavated pits smelt strongly of ammonia, derived from urine, and these may have been de-hairing pits. Other pits smelt so toxic that they were probably full of the combination of chicken and dog dung used in 'bating', 'puring' or 'mastering' de-hairing pits (Thomson 1998, 5–7). Fragments of eggshell found in these can be interpreted as representing the most durable element of the sweepings of henhouses used in bating solutions, as interpreted at a medieval tanning site at Pavement in York (MacGregor 1998, 15).

Barley seeds and small fruit seeds identified in several of the tanning pits could be interpreted as part of de-hairing or pre-tanning skin-treatment solutions. Historically skins could be subject to 'raising' or 'drenching' in fermented barley (Thomson 1998, 8), or soaked in elderberry liquid (MacGregor 1998, 15), but at New Street the evidence for de-hairing using 'bating' and urine was more convincing. No evidence was identified for the use of salt or alum tanning, which is a process in which the skin is tanned with the

hair still attached. This is interesting as the contemporary tannery excavated in Thomas Street is believed to have carried out alum tanning (see Duffy above).

THE TANNING PROCESS

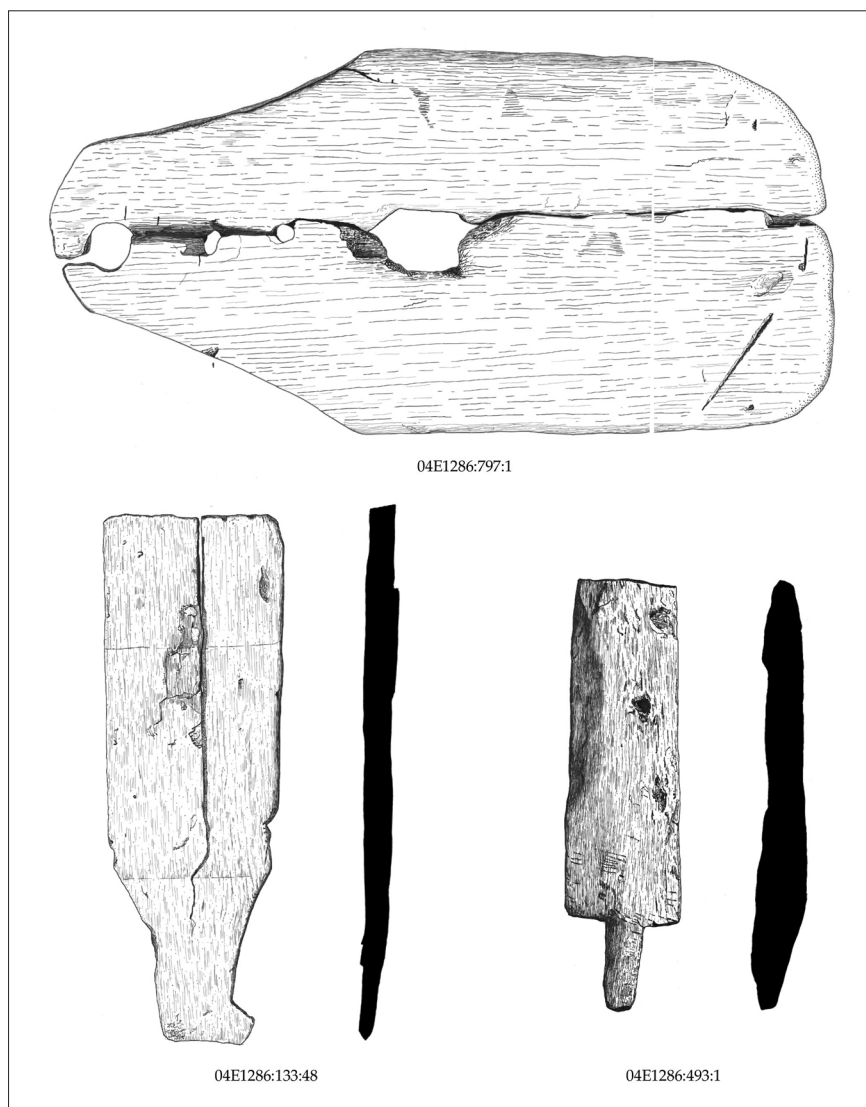
The active ingredient in the tanning process is the astringent tannin, derived from vegetable matter, which draws liquids out of organic material. Tannins are present in coffee and red wine. Tannins can be extracted from most vegetable matter, but the most common and concentrated source historically and archaeologically is tree-bark (MacGregor 1998, 16). Oak-bark was the most commonly used vegetable tanning agent, and indeed in *c.* 1300 all other agents were prohibited in Colchester. All the New Street tanning pits contained a thick layer of chipped tree-bark near their bases, which was identified as alder and oak, and it was this bark layer that provided the principal method for identifying a pit as a tanning pit. The tree-bark had been ground to different thicknesses in different pits, which would have allowed for varying strengths of the tanning-solution, in the same way as grinding coffee more finely allows for a stronger brew.

Hides were immersed in the pits in solutions of bark and water for a period of six to eighteen months (Shaw 1984, 242), being cycled through the various solutions, and moving on to progressively stronger ones. A number of wooden paddles that were probably used to stir the tanning-solution in the pits were found on the site. A wooden shovel was also identified (fig. 7.7), perhaps used to dig the pits, or to fill them with bark chippings. Once the hide had gone through this cycle it would no longer rot, and became a piece of leather.

CURRYING

The preparation of the tanned hide into a workable piece of leather was called 'currying'. After tanning, the skin was washed and carefully dried, which probably occurred at New Street in the broad shallow rinsing pits. A slicker and beam were often used to squeeze out the remaining liquid. A slicker could take the form of a smooth rod or round-edged slab of glass, and one of these was found during the excavation. The leather was then stretched on a beam and the currier would work and shape the skin with a special knife. A creaser from this final phase was identified in an excavation next door at Fumbally Lane (Lohan 1998, 309). Three bags of suede-like flesh shavings from the currying process were recovered from New Street, demonstrating that currying was taking place on site.

Several of the unidentified pits on the site had a fishy smell, and the fill had a noticeably greasy sheen. Fish-bones were also identified. It is possible that



7.7 Wooden shovel and paddles

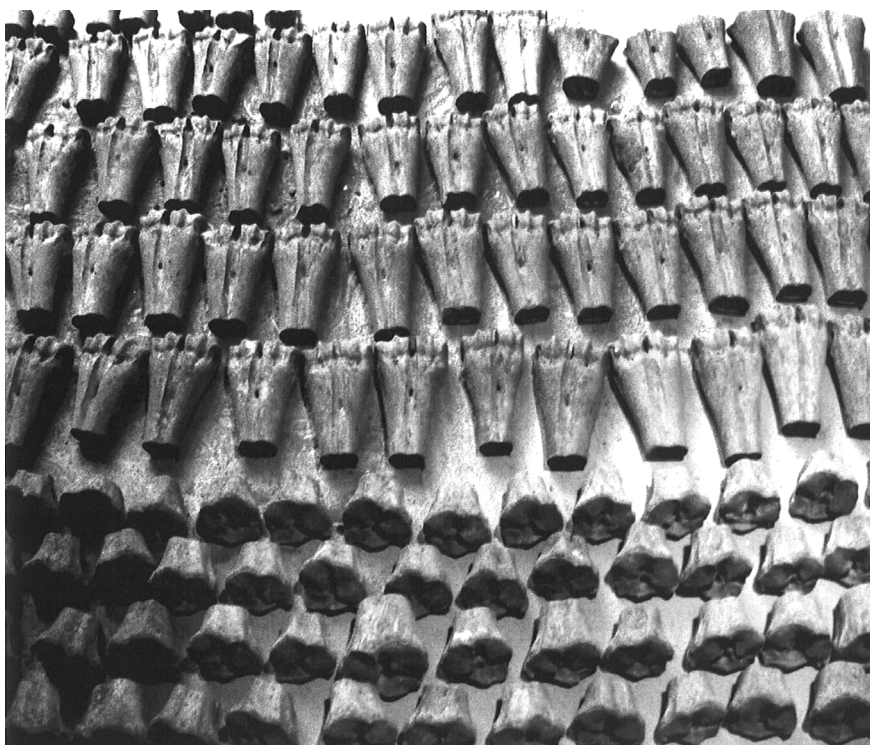
these pits were related to a process of using fatty fish oils to tan very fine leathers (Thomson 1998, 7) or treat finished fine leather. Similarly, 'neatsfoot oil' derived from cattle metapodials (lower leg-bones) is also used in currying or 'chamoising' (Serjeantson 1989, 141; Scally 1997, 12) and may also have been produced on the site.

BONE-WORKING

It might be expected that the bone-working crafts and leatherworking crafts would operate together, as both use different parts of the same animal. However, there was no evidence for bone-working at a craft level at New Street. The worked bone artefacts recovered during the excavation included



7.8 Find – wooden spoon



7.9 Find – bone offcuts

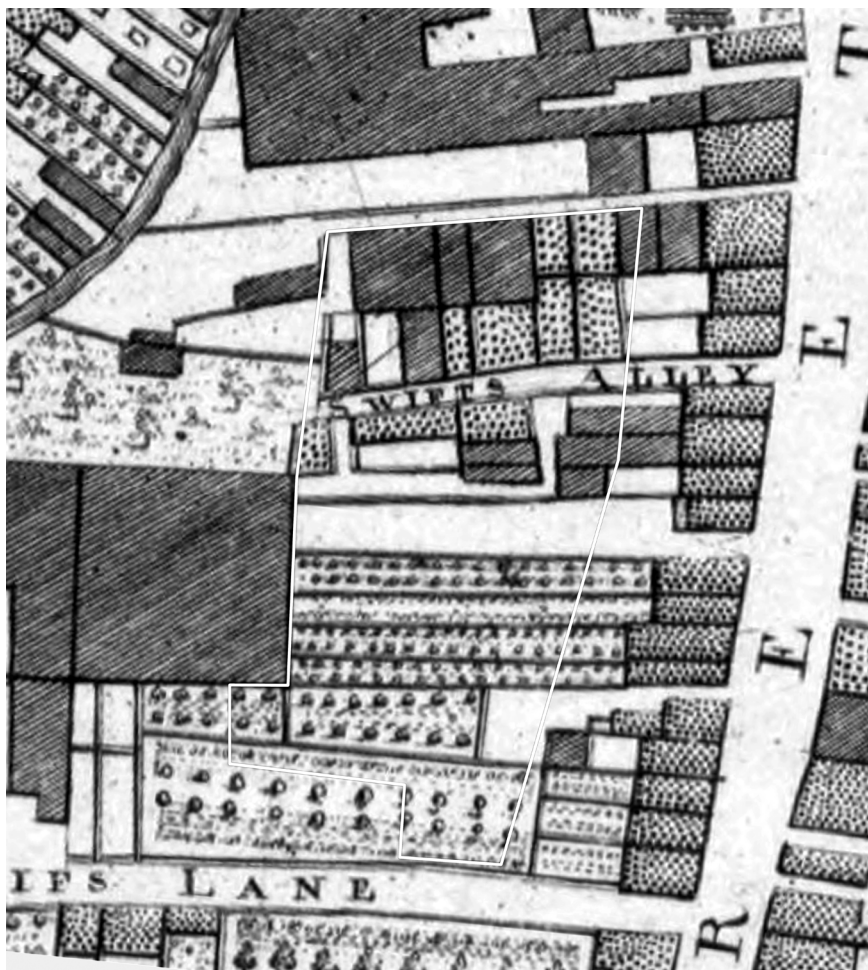
pins, needles, weaving tools and a stamp, all of which were roughly made and were probably casual tools made as needed by the leatherworkers (fig. 7.8).

A number of small pits, possibly disused tanning pits, were packed with very specific parts of cattle bones: the distal and proximal ends of cattle metapoidals (fig. 7.9). The middle part of the bone was absent, and indeed these bone elements were very rare on the site. This suggests that the middle part of cattle leg-bones was systematically removed, probably by tanners, and sent to a bone-worker, for example for comb manufacture. Very similar deposits were identified in the medieval tannery at Southampton and in Muster in Germany (MacGregor 1998, 17–18), and interpreted similarly. At New Row a similarly large proportion of metapoidal cattle-bones was interpreted as evidence for the production of 'neatsfoot oil' for currying fine leathers (Scally 1997, 12), and in this regard it is interesting that the locations of most of the New Street metapoidal offcuts matched the locations of the unusual tanning pits that contained the highest proportion of juvenile bone.

SWIFT'S ALLEY

The greatest concentration of tanning activity from every period was located either side of one of the northern plot boundaries, which later became a laneway called Swift's Alley. This laneway appears to be marked, unnamed, on de Gomme's 1673 map and again on Brooking's 1728 map, and is first named on Rocque's 1756 map (fig. 7.10). On the site, the lane was defined by a stone-lined drain, which cut a medieval drain. Based on the arrangement of late-medieval tanning pits arranged in well-defined rows either side of the drain, the laneway most likely dates back to the late-medieval period. The tanning pits along Swift's Alley were of particular interest because they were arranged in distinctive rows from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, which demonstrated an exceptionally strong continuity of tanning practices and organization from the late-medieval to early post-medieval period.

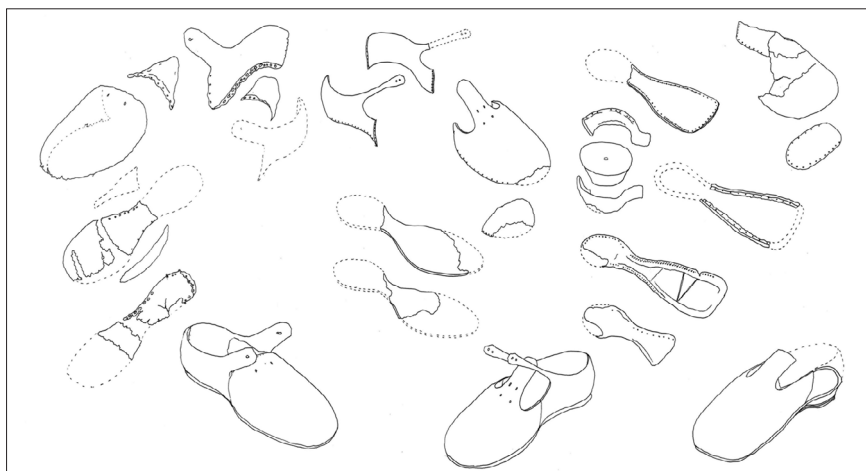
The most interesting artefacts were also found in the Swift's Alley tanning pits, including an amber bead, sixteenth-century Nuremburg *jetons*, lathe-turned wooden bowls, numerous wooden pins probably used for stretching leather, and the seeds of exotic fruit such as fig. The seventeenth-century tanning pits along Swift's Alley also contained a large amount of glazed ridge-tile, which may represent the refurbishment and re-roofing of the New Street and Swift's Alley houses following the damage caused by the 1640s wars. The remains of two buildings were also excavated off Swift's Alley, including a two-phase seventeenth-century structure with back-to-back fireplaces. The first phase had almost no foundation and was not very solid, while the second phase, dated by ceramics to c.1700, sat on the reused wooden timbers of the earlier building, which is a recurring pattern around the Blackpitts area.



7.10 Rocque 1756 map showing Swift's Alley

COBBLING AND GUILDS

The tanning pits along Swift's Alley contained evidence for cobbling, in the form of a large amount of fragments of leather shoes and leather shoe-offcuts (fig. 7.11). Twenty-nine semi-complete shoes were analyzed by Nicholl and divided into nine different shoe types representing the full range of styles from the medieval to the early modern periods. There are several examples of shoe parts which have been cut down to provide material for children's footwear. Both Irish brogue and Continental-style shoes were identified, and the assemblage is comparable to shoes found on archaeological sites at Mill Street,



7.11 Find – shoes

Kevin Street, Chancery Lane and Dean Street in Dublin 8 (Nicholl, pers. comm., 2019). The shoe remains were indicative of the repair or modification of shoes, rather than their manufacture. Considering that every single step of the leatherworking process – from the skinning and deboning of the hide, de-hairing, washing, tanning, and currying (Reed 1972; Serjeantson 1989) – was represented on the site, it is unusual that no definitive evidence for shoe manufacture (as opposed to repair) was identified.

Perhaps this is evidence of the influence of guilds. The tanners of Dublin were granted a charter by King Edward I in 1289 and formed one of the oldest guilds in the city (Webb 1929, 214). By 1735, five of the guilds represented at the common council of the city were leatherworkers: these were the tanners, curriers, glovers, shoemakers and saddlers (Webb 1913, 14). Medieval British guild records suggest that tanners, curriers and shoemakers were separated into different crafts, and different guilds, and that the three could not work together (MacGregor 1998, 16; Thomson 1998, 8). At New Street, tanners and curriers do appear to have been working together, which does not fit with historical records of guilds. However, the suggestion that shoe manufacture, and bone-working, do not appear to have taken place on the site, may indicate guild influence. This raises the question of what archaeological evidence would look like for guild organization in a site such as this.

DECLINE OF THE TANNERIES

The Irish tanning industry was in decline by the second half of the eighteenth century, as suggested by a pamphlet written in 1773 urging tanners to adopt

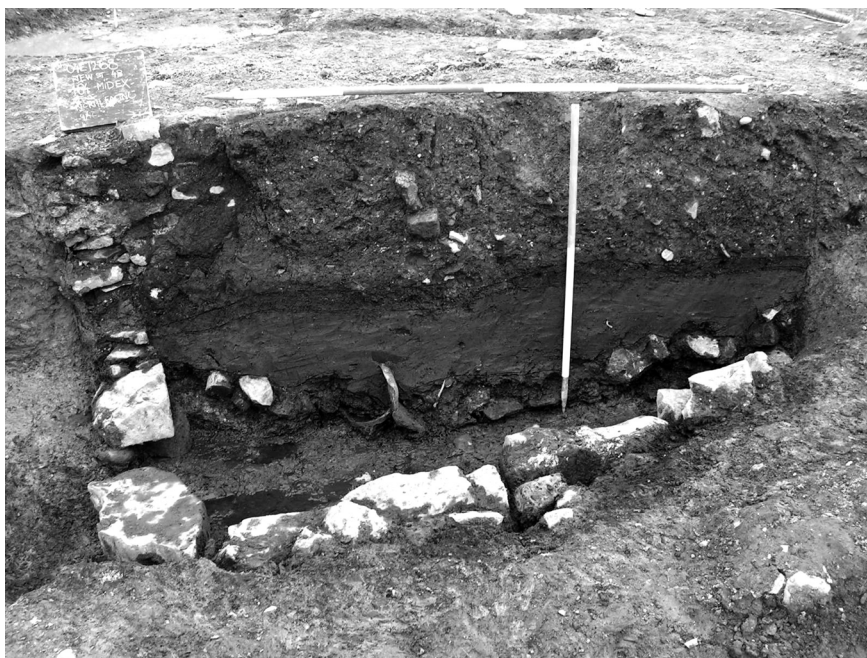
new improved methods (John Nicholl, pers. comm., 2014). More sophisticated tanning techniques were being used in England, and the Irish tanners were falling behind. There is some evidence that the tanners at the New Street site attempted to modernize, reflected by two stone-lined pits dated to the first half of the eighteenth century (fig. 7.12). These two pits were similar to tanning pits found at larger and later leatherworking sites in Dublin, and were among the last tanning pits in use on the site. Local competition for leather manufacturing was growing, as demonstrated by the numerous archaeological investigations in the vicinity of the New Street site that have revealed extensive tanneries dating to the eighteenth century. Like at Northampton, these 'modern' tanneries were large, laid out in an organized system, and the tanning pits were formally lined. They represent a modern approach to tanning. The Dublin tanning industry as a whole was becoming industrialized, and small cottage-industry producers, such as those on New Street in the Blackpitts tanning quarter, were being out-produced.

THE COTTAGE-INDUSTRY TANNING TRADITION

The layout, organization, and form of the late thirteenth- to seventeenth-century tanning remains at New Street South are in sharp contrast to previously excavated eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tanneries, both in Dublin city and abroad. The evidence from the excavation suggests that tanning pits at New Street were dug as they were needed and informally lined, with perhaps only a few open at any one time in each plot as at Exe Bridge and at High Street in Exeter (MacGregor 1998, 22). The 'Blackpitts tanning quarter' is best visualized as comprising several small household tanneries and cobbling workshops in adjoining plots, rather than as a single organized tannery of an industrial nature. The tanning pits would have been situated behind the houses fronting New Street, in which the leatherworkers may have lived and sold their wares.

The strong evidence for continuity of leatherworking and tanning on the site from the late thirteenth to the late seventeenth century is important. This continuity is evident in the organization of different leatherworking processes in specific plots, and in specific locations within each plot over time, as well as in the continuity of traditional processes and ways of working. One of the reasons this continuity is important is because it crosses the transition from the medieval to the early-modern period, which is generally placed in the mid-sixteenth century by archaeologists.

This transition marks a time of enormous political, religious and societal change in Ireland and abroad, particularly in elite spheres. It is of interest that this great change is not reflected at the Blackpitts leatherworking quarter. Instead, the site demonstrates a significant change in the late seventeenth



7.12 Tanning pit, 18th century type

century, with the decline and collapse of the cottage-industry leatherworking quarter and subsequent expansion of leatherworking at an industrial scale outside of the site. This period of fundamental change in material culture saw the emergence of new manufacturing bases and production of new goods for export, and the exponential growth of Dublin as a manufacturing centre and as the seat of central government (McNeill 2007, 12). It may be that the late seventeenth-century societal and economic shifts were more significant for non-elites living and working at the edges of Dublin, or at least among leatherworkers in Blackpitts. These excavation findings can thus demonstrate how different periods of social and economic change are reflected differently at different scales of analysis within Dublin.

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