

Local folklore in Hitchin for the past hundred years has insisted that there is a plague pit on Queen Street. According to Reginald Hine, quoting an (unnamed) 'old historian', 'every man, woman and child in Dead Street (now Queen Street) died' in 1665. The 'old historian' was probably William Dunnage, whose 1815 manuscript history of Hitchin states '1665 The Plague raged in a very violent manner; whereof great numbers of Persons died; from which circumstance it is generally believed that Dead Street took its name'. Hine's exaggeration suggesting that all the inhabitants died from the plague is typical of his purple prose. He adds that in '1853 a large number of skeletons, buried only two feet deep, were discovered behind No. 40, Queen Street, with several coins upon them dated 1660'. One of the pieces of evidence for this supposed devastation by the plague was the name of the street.

However, Dead Street was a name used in other places for an urban back street: part of what is now called King Street in Royston (the part where you can find Royston Museum) was once known as Dead Street, as was King Street in Brighton. The Royston Dead Street also claims to take its name from the number of people who died there from plague. Both the Hitchin and Royston streets were one of the back streets of their respective towns. Even more worrying is that our first record of the name in Hitchin dates from 1556, more than a century before the plague that supposedly lent it its ominous name. In placing the plague in his chronology under 1665, Hine seems to have forgotten that in the first volume of his history, he ascribed the name to the Black Death of 1349.

Moreover, Hine also records the number of burials made in the churchyard during 1665: 36 in August, 55 in September, 52 in October, 23 in November and 6 in December. These include the burials of the victims of the plague of that year, showing a peak in September. All were buried in consecrated ground, not in the yard or yards of properties fronting Dead Street. Indeed, burying people in gardens was not legal in the 1660s: even those who died from plague were buried in churchyards.

During 2004, the demolition of the former Sodexo House on Queen Street to make way for retirement apartments led to a flurry of press interest when The Heritage Network, monitoring the work, discovered human remains. Scare headlines in the local press suggested that disturbing the burials – assumed to be from the long-rumoured plague pit – would release noxious gases into the atmosphere and that there was a real risk to public health. There might even be an outbreak of plague in the town! These silly stories were published more than a century after Robert Koch had conclusively shown the miasma theory of transmission to be wrong.

In fact, the burials were from a disused Congregational burial ground that had supposedly been 'cleared' in 1969. Instead of removing the burials for reburial elsewhere, the company had merely emptied 45 of the 276 graves and dumped the bones into a pit on the edge of the site. The remains of at least 349 people were eventually found there by archaeologists, all dating between 1690 and 1869, long after the last outbreak of plague.

So, whose burials were those found in 1853? The answer came when a full-scale excavation took place in 2001 at 40 Queen Street, the site of the earlier discoveries. Here, the site was found to have been agricultural ground throughout the High Middle Ages, with a field

boundary ditch falling out of use after about 1350. The abandonment of the field could easily have been a result of the population fall after the Black Death, between 1349 and 1361. The ploughsoil overlay the burials found during the excavation, showing that they were earlier than both the 1665 plague and the Black Death. No artefacts accompanied the skeletons, so it was not clear how much earlier they were.



Six graves survived, of which only two were complete: later activity had truncated the others. All were aligned east to west, with the head at the western end. This is usually an indication that the cemetery was used by Christians. That made the original excavators from the Museum of London's Archaeological Services suspect that the burials dated from the late seventh century onwards. At this time, the local area was part of the statelet of the *Hicce*, a people whose name ended up being that of their largest settlement.

There was enough bone in five of the graves to send off for radiocarbon dating. When the results came back, they surprised the team, as they all fall in the fourth to early seventh centuries: the median dates were AD 588, 609, 431, 609 and 609, but the range was AD 253 to 772. Dates at the extreme ends of the range are unlikely to be accurate. If we take the most likely dates from each, the range is reduced to AD 320 to 688. This meant that the earliest burials may have been made in the Roman period and the latest in the early medieval. The early medieval period is usually and misleadingly labelled 'Anglo-Saxon'; these burials show why the label is wrong, as there were no Anglo-Saxon settlers in Hitchin in the fourth or fifth centuries.

This is the burial ground of a Christian community. Even if we go with the median date range (AD 431 to 609), the first Anglo-Saxons to be converted were in the Kingdom of Kent, and that was after St Augustine arrived in 597. What we are looking at is a burial ground that began to be used in the late Roman period and continuing well into the time of Anglo-Saxon domination of this area, unlikely to have happened before AD 500. In other words, it is the cemetery of people who would have thought of themselves as Britons or Romans (perhaps even both, just as people today can call themselves English and British at the same time).

By coincidence, Pre-Construct Archaeology was excavating a settlement barely 70 m to the north at 33 Queen Street around the same time. Although the results have not yet been published, a draft from 2011 tells the story of the site and look at its artefacts. At the street frontage, the excavators found a timber-framed house that was rebuilt on the same location at least twice after it was first founded. Pottery associated with the first phase of the

building included fourth-century types. There was also Alice Holt/Farnham type ware, which is typically found in North Hertfordshire between 390 and 420, in one of the many pits to the east of the house. Other pits contained pottery suggesting that the earliest activity on the site (before the buildings) began after about 270. Clearly, the three phases of building cannot all fit into the 'Roman' period and must extend into the fifth century, if not later.

Activity on the two sites overlaps. We seem to have a community that began to grow up on Queen Street in the final quarter of the third century, and a cemetery that was established at some point after AD 253. So far, so good. However, the excavators of 33 Queen Street did not recognise any artefacts between the early fifth century and medieval pottery (after about 900). This is a period when industrial pottery production ended (perhaps some time between about 420 and 440) and coin use stopped, around 435.

Dating features of the later fifth and sixth centuries is not easy in North Hertfordshire (or anywhere, for that matter), and much of it depends on context. Although fifth- and sixth-century locally made pottery in the Roman tradition occurs in Baldock and some surrounding settlements, the excavators of 33 Queen Street did not recognise it there. This does not mean that it is not present: small sherds of this material can look like earlier Roman or even Iron Age types, and if the pottery analyst has not seen the local types, they may easily overlook it. It is quite possible that the Queen Street settlement continued into the seventh century, as the burials suggest.

So these people were Christian Romano-Britons. Their presence in Hitchin forms a contrast with Baldock, where pagan practices continued into the sixth century. Although there is a late fourth-century Christian cemetery at The Tene in Baldock, there is so far no evidence that it continued in use into the fifth century or later. It is very tempting to think that the local Christians moved to Hitchin to get away from the pagans; perhaps they were following St Paul's advice in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians VI.14 Μὴ γίνεσθε ἑτεροζυγοῦντες ἀπίστοις ('Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers' in the King James Version). We may even be able to work out what these people called themselves in addition to *Brittones* ('Britons') and *Romani* ('Romans'). We have long known that the placename Hitchin comes from the word *Hicce*, recorded as the name of a tiny statelet in the 'Tribal Hidage', a possibly seventh-century document. It is usually taken to be a list of Anglo-Saxon peoples who were tributary to the King of Mercia. However, *Hicce* is not a Germanic word (nor is *Gifle*, the name of the people listed before the *Hicce*, whose name survives as the River Ivel). It is much more likely to be Brittonic, the branch of the Celtic languages spoken in Great Britain. The most likely form of the name to give *Hicce* would be something like **Succī*, 'Pig-Breeders', a typical Celtic ethnic name. We know that pigs were especially important to the local economy in the century or more before the Roman invasion of AD 43, and the **Succī* perhaps prided themselves on the quality of their pork.

Perhaps I could have entitled this piece 'From Plague Pit to Pork Producers'!

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