The Tanner's Shop in Verulamium   by: Bill Groom

Archaeology had been almost a secondary industry in St. Albans, Hertfordshire: I could
remember, as a boy, watching with consuming interest the excavation of Verulamium itself.
That had been in the early '30's when the work had been a blessing to the area. Now it
was 1955, just two years before Professor Frere was to discover a whole row of shops
dating back to not later than 49 A.D. I was a part-time teacher of Timber Technology at
City of London College. In conversation with my neighbour, I happened to mention that it
was possible to identify accurately any species of wood from a tiny splinter-sized sample.
My neighbour was an avid amateur archaeologist, and I was soon roped in as 'expert wit-
ness' on a dig that was taking place.

The city had demolished a building, and was anxious to get the 'diggers' out in order to
be able to pave it for a car park before the Autumn came. Permission was given for a short
four week 'dig', then the city would have to move in. The site proved to be immediately
outside the old Roman wall of the city. At about three to four feet depth it became
obvious that the ground was 'fill' of some kind: soft, wet, and slightly boggy, organic
fill. Since the group was digging against time it had been decided to lift out large
scoops of likely material which we could sort later. This idea proved fortunate, since
the main item which was discovered had to be uncovered quickly, catalogued, dismantled
and then specially treated.

At the foot of the wall stood a complete open fronted wooden shelter. There were heavy
wooden blocks on the compacted earthen floor, and shelves at the back and sides. These
provided storage space for the pottery vessels which had contained the preparation ma-
terials which the former owner had used in his somewhat 'anti-social'trade. After some
1300 years only two of the vessels were broken - an intact example of a Tanner's shop.
A nearby pile of trimmings yielded various scraps of many types of skin - but mostly
sheepskins.

The little shop had to be rapidly dismantled, catalogued and taken to a workshop which
had been set up close by. Here it was cleaned, and treated with formaldehyde to retard
the drying out process. Wood which has been preserved in moisture, but without air for
so long will quickly disintegrate if not dried very slowly. Once treated the whole
shelter could be set up on display in the local Roman Museum.

It is possible to break down the hemicellulose which glues individual wood cells together.
Under a microscope, the now separated cells can be sorted, identified, and counted as to
the number of different cell types. The combination denotes the species, and there are
no two species which have the same combination. In this instance the boards which formed
the cladding of the shelter were of Common Elm, while the structural timbers were a
mixture of European Oak and Sweet or Spanish Chestnut. The heavy blocks, which were
probably trimming blocks, or stripping tables, were of Sycamore.

For a while the experts puzzled over the fact that it had been buried so quickly, and so
completely as to preserve the wood without visible signs of incipient decay. An exami-
nation of the organic 'fill' provided the answer. Owing to the unpleasant nature of the
tanner's trade, the Romans had apparently passed a 'Zoning by-law' which forced him to
work beyond the city limits, and he had obviously chosen the site as being most convenient
for receiving skins for tanning, and for transporting the finished article to the market.
When the owner had died (or been forced to give up his business through bureaucratic re-
gulation), it so happened that there had been a fruit and vegetable market on the other
side of the wall at approximately the same spot. What do you do with rotting cabbage
leaves and other vegetable trimmings? The whole shelter had been quickly buried by a
continuous shower of such trash. I have often thought since that it would have been a
considerable letdown if the boards, etc. had been so decayed as to make accurate identi-
fication impossible. Perhaps that is why so many fences are erected between neighbours