ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AT YIELDEN

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This report describes the archaeological evaluation carried out in the High Street, Yielden in response to the condition attached to outline planning consent which was granted on appeal in August 1991. The evaluation was commissioned by Francis Jackson Estates Ltd, and carried out by Bedfordshire County Council's Archaeology Service (Excavation Division). The information it contains will be used by the County Council's Conservation and Archaeology Section to advise North Bedfordshire Borough Council's Planning Officer in assessing any further archaeological action required in advance of development in accordance with the terms of the outline consent.

The report carries out the instructions encapsulated in the archaeological brief and specification agreed by the County Archaeologist. The work was intended to provide information as to the nature, date, type, and level of preservation of archaeological deposits in a potentially sensitive part of historic Yielden, where no previous archaeological investigations had been conducted. Recommendations for any further recording are based on these findings.

Topographical Situation

Yielden is situated in north Bedfordshire, approximately 1km from the Northamptonshire border. It lies immediately at the foot of an extremely well preserved motte and bailey castle which is a scheduled ancient monument. The site itself evidenced substantial surface earthwork formation of banks, ditches and plateaux, with as much as 3m variation in ground level apparent at modern ground level. Part of the site seemed to be disturbed by quarrying, and there appeared to be a high probability of encountering waterlogged material and other particularly well preserved deposits.

Methodology

The evaluation was carried out according to the detailed specification approved by the County Archaeologist. The first stage of the evaluation comprised a detailed measured survey of the earthworks which was drawn up as a hachured plan (fig 1). The next stage, machine cutting of excavation transects, was provided by Francis Jackson Estates Ltd under archaeological supervision.

This involved the removal of topsoil down onto archaeologically sensitive deposits which occurred between 20 and 60 cm below ground surface. Once topsoil had been removed by machine, the transects were cleaned by hand to reveal features such as pits, ditches and postholes cut into previous ground surfaces and natural subsoil.

These features were all planned and sampled in order to find out what they were, how old they were, what they contained, and how they related to each other. All the finds, mostly comprising animal bones, pottery and flints, were taken back to the St Mary's Church Archaeology Centre for cleaning, analysing, conservation and cataloguing. All the evidence was then integrated to form this report.

The Excavations

Each of the seven transects is described below. Fig 1 shows their positions within the area of development, with the archaeological features shown in different colours according to their date. Hachures indicate the breaks in slope of the earthworks. All of the transects were two metres wide, and were within a few centimetres of the specified lengths.

TRANSECT 1

This transect was positioned to cut a section through a N-S aligned earthwork identified in the specification. The transect measured 19.45m in length and contained features dating to the post-medieval period. Uncovered were two N-S aligned ditches and an area of collapsed walling aligned N-S underlying and therefore predated the earthwork itself. A broad feature of indeterminable function at least 6m wide was also located, from which a well preserved 15th to 17th century copper rumbler bell (either a horse trapping or a dress accessory) was found. These features were sealed by a 20cm deposit of overburden.

Other finds included a wine bottle dating to the 17th or 18th century, 18th century pottery, part of a horseshoe together with bones from cattle and sheep.

TRANSECT 2

This transect was located 20m north of transect 1 and was 20m in length. The large post- medieval feature picked up within transect 1 continued into this transect, together with another possible post-medieval linear feature, both of these were sealed by a 20cm thick overburden.

TRANSECT 3

This trench was 24m long. Within this a substantial area of oolitic limestone fragments was uncovered some 20cm thick dating to the medieval period. This could have served either as a trackway, or a courtyard surface. Found within this spread was part of a 10th-11th century pilaster shaft (an architectural worked stone). Adjacent to this surface were the possible remains of a probable medieval NW-SE aligned wall constructed with

roughly hewn blocks of oolitic limestone. These features were sealed by an overburden of between 30-60cm in depth.

Finds from this trench also included a sherd of medieval pottery, animal bones consisting of cattle, sheep and horse bones.

TRANSECT 4

This trench was 14m long. It contained several archaeological features including ditches (aligned approximately N-S) and small pits, one of which could be Roman in date. One of the N-S aligned ditches underlied part of the surveyed earthworks (see fig 1) and probably relates to an earlier land boundary. Finds recovered included middle Saxon pottery dating to the 8th-9th centuries and an iron key dating to the 10th-11th centuries. One of the pits also contained 8th-9th century pottery along with a fragment of quern stone (used for grinding corn). Two NW-SE aligned ditches contained 10th-11th century pottery. Cutting through these features was a similarly aligned ditch containing pottery dating to the 12th-13th centuries. This in turn was cut by a large N-S aligned steep sided cut ditch containing an almost complete 17th-18th century wine bottle, 18th century pottery and waterlogged deposits including the remains of a planked wooden structure. (see fig 2) This was probably used to revet the very steep sides of this ditch. Sealing all of these features was an overburden of soil 25cm thick.

Other finds included animal bones consisting of cattle, sheep and pig.

TRANSECT 5

This trench measured 23.5m in length and was positioned to bisect a linear earthwork visible on the earthwork survey. The earliest material uncovered was a layer of soil of a pre- Roman date which had been truncated by the later activity. Finds from this soil consist of flints dating from the neolithic and Bronze Age periods (c2000 - 800 BC) and represent the earliest material found on the site. Underlying the earthwork itself was a substantial deposit of material of post Roman/early Saxon date, which both sealed earlier Roman features (ditches) and was itself cut by later 10th-11th century features including ditches and post holes, some of these still retaining their original packing stones. This deposit accentuates the surface earthwork and could represent a much earlier ground surface that had been protected by the earthwork. Other archaeological features included intercutting ditches, postholes, and possible pits of a medieval and post medieval origin.

Pottery dates from the Roman period, the early-middle Saxon periods (5th-9th century) and the early medieval period (10th-11th century). In addition other finds consisted of an 18th-19th century octagonal glass bottle, part of a quern stone and part of a crucible which would have been probably used for melting down copper alloy. Cattle and pig

bones were also recorded from some of these features. The archaeological features were sealed by 40 - 60cm of overburden.

TRANSECT 6

Transect 6 was also placed so as to bisect the linear earthwork but was positioned 35m to the south of trench 5 and measured 24m in length. Trenches 5, 6 and 7 were located on higher ground and it is in this area that a longer history of occupation was found.

As in trench 5 the pre Roman deposit of material was uncovered, along with a series of intercutting ditches and postholes. One of these ditches aligned NW-SE possibly formed part of an enclosure, with its continuation to the south of the trench. This could form part of a defensive circuit for a small Romano-British farmstead or the northern boundary ditch for a Roman field. Other features included smaller Roman gullies, 10th/11th century NE-SW, NW-SE aligned linear ditches, and a 13th-14th century linear ditch aligned on a NE-SW. These archaeological deposits were sealed by an overburden of soil 40-80cm deep.

Finds from this trench included pottery dating from the Roman period, the early Saxon period (5th-6th century), the early medieval period (10th-11th) and the 13th-14th century. Part of an iron blade was found within one of the ditch fills. Flint material dating to the neolithic and Bronze Age periods was also recorded and was similar in nature to the material found in Transect 5. Animal bone consisted almost entirely of cattle bone.

TRANSECT 7

Transect 7 measured 12.4m long and as in the earlier two trenches 5 and 6, contained the pre-Roman ground surface. Cutting through this was a complex series of intercutting ditches, gullies, pits and postholes. It is likely that these ditches and gullies form additional parts of an enclosure that dates to the Roman period. Other features include linear ditches aligned E-W and N-S dating to the 12th-13th centuries and the post medieval period. Finds from these features included pottery dating from the Roman period, the early Medieval period (10th-11th century) and 13th / 18th material. Also found were part of a Roman glass vessel rim, three iron objects including part of a horseshoe, strands of wire, and a Roman T-clamp used in building construction work. Cattle and bird bone were also recorded from this trench. These features were sealed by an overburden of between 50-60cm of soil.

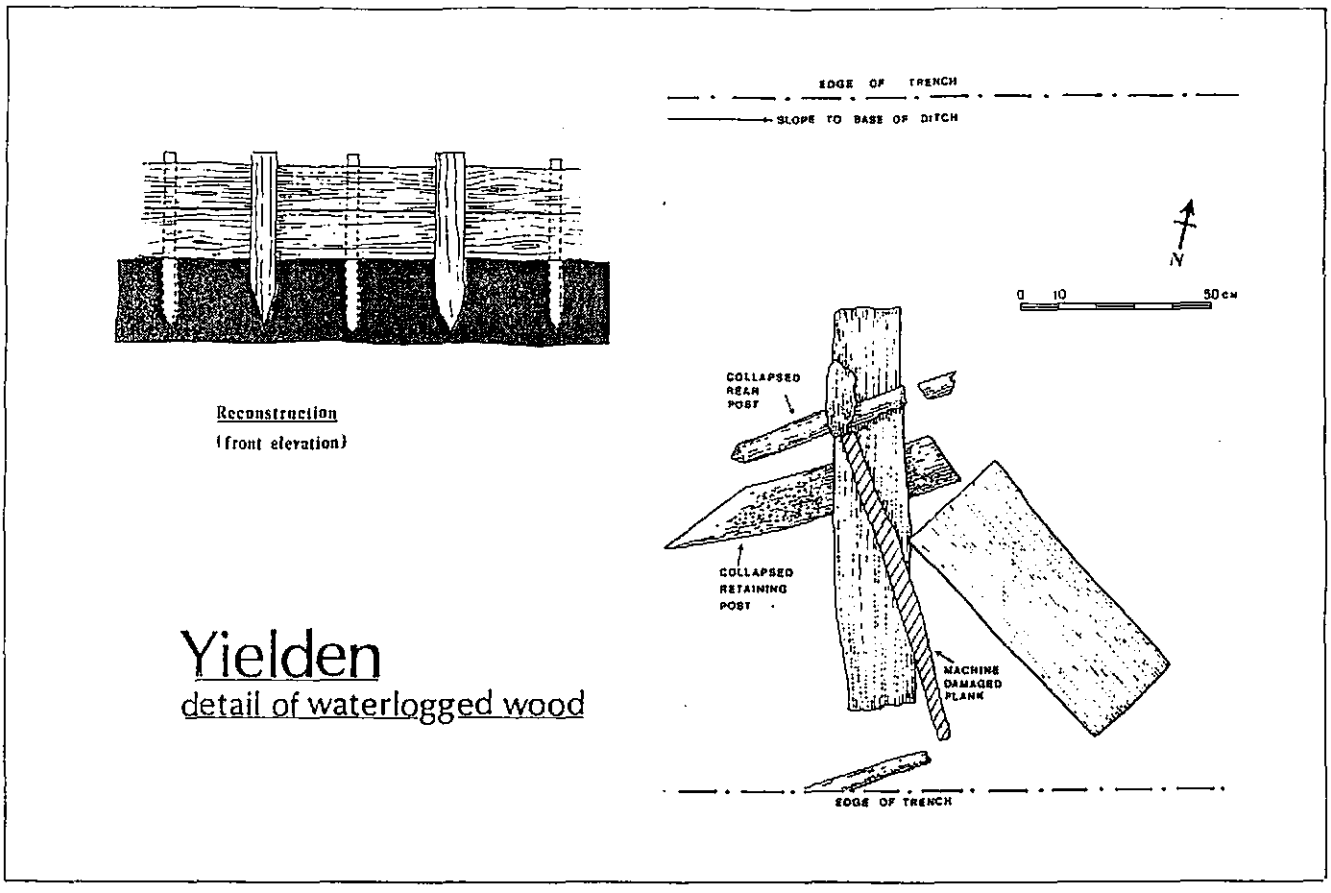

FIGURE 2. Transect 4: Possible reconstruction of timber revetment to ditch. This is probably post-medieval in date.

Summary

A total of 275 square metres of the site was exposed for investigation. A wide variety of archaeological deposits were identified, including ditches, gullies, pits, postholes, possible timber slots, stone walls and a metalled surface representing a road or courtyard surface. Preservation was very good for three principal reasons.

Firstly, there had been no recent building on the development site to disturb the archaeology.

Secondly, the substantial later earthwork banks had sealed and protected earlier deposits including a possible old ground surface of prehistoric date.

Thirdly, the high water table on some parts of the site provided waterlogged conditions. This meant that organic materials such as wood which do not normally survive in normal, drier, ground conditions were in evidence. Thus there is the potential for finding more organic material such as leather, textiles, plant and insect remains.

The site showed evidence of occupation from the late neolithic and early Bronze Age (c.2000 to 800 BC), with the possibility of some preserved *in situ* deposits interpreted as a possible old ground surface, containing prehistoric flintwork. These deposits were themselves cut by Roman activity. They appear to be restricted to the higher ground since they were only seen in transects 5,6 and 7. There is a high possibility of finding associated structural evidence should larger areas of these deposits be exposed.

Roman activity is represented by a series of linear ditches with steep sides, ditches, gullies, postholes, a possible timber slot and pits. One ditch almost certainly forms part of an enclosure or settlement boundary; limestone fragments were found in its fill, indicating the probability of a masonry structure in the vicinity. It is possible that this might be associated with a Roman villa discovered in 1881 by Rev R S Baker (Simco 1984 : 111-112).

A rare Middle Saxon component is supplied by a sequence of ditches, gullies, pits and postholes. Some of the postholes were packed with stones and probably indicate structures rather than mere fence lines. Activity of this date is sparse throughout the county, and the importance of this sequence is highlighted by the presence of diagnostic, and equally rare Maxey Ware pottery.

Medieval activity is evidenced by the finding of a 10th-11th century iron key in a feature underlying a bank. The road or courtyard surface and remnants of a masonry structure appear to be medieval in date. The pilaster shaft associated with them must indicate a building of some high status in the vicinity. 13th century pottery was found in ditch fills. The excavated ditches appear to follow the general contours of the earthworks, and it could be that they represent part of a defended medieval settlement, either manorial or associated with the nearby castle.

The post medieval activity was confined mostly to the end of the period, mainly to the 17th and 18th centuries. The planked wooden structure is ascribed to this period, probably dated by the near complete 17th-18th century wine bottle. Animal bone from this period may have importance for animal husbandry studies.

The Finds

The main classes of archaeological finds consist of the following:

THE CERAMIC ARTEFACTS

Two boxes of pottery were recovered from the excavation. All of it was in good condition although some of it was somewhat abraded. It has been washed, marked and boxed in context order.

The date range of the pottery from the site is 5th century to 18th century. Pottery can be relatively closely dated and can be used to give a date to the feature it came from. The date can be arrived at from the date range of the latest piece in that feature.

The wide date range of the pottery indicates human activity on the site over a long period of time, throughout the Roman, Saxon, medieval and post-medieval periods. Analysis of the pottery will not only give an indication of the date but also the trade and contact patterns of the site, as well as its status and function through time.

Of particular note is the presence of shell-tempered middle Saxon pottery, (8th-9th century). Small quantities are known from other sites in the county, for example Elstow Abbey, the town of Bedford, and the deserted medieval village of Stratton near Biggleswade. This type of pottery is distributed throughout the Midlands and eastern England, and is divided into a northern and southern group. The boundaries of these two groups have not yet been clearly defined. The known middle Saxon shell- tempered pottery from Bedfordshire has so far fallen into the southern group. This site at, the northern end of the county may help in clarifying the boundaries between the two groups.

THE NON-CERAMIC ARTEFACTS

A total of 17 'small finds' (of iron, copper alloy, stone and glass) were found. In addition a single iron timber nail, a small quantity of ironworking slag and 9 portions of oak planks were recovered.

The material ranges in date from the prehistoric (flint flakes and implements), Roman (vessel glass, querns, ironwork and metal-working debris), medieval (horseshoes, an architectural fragment, door key and rumbler bell) and post-medieval (wine bottles) periods. Although evidence is limited it does indicate human activity in and around the site, although it cannot be stated whether this was continuous or not. Some metalworking is indicated in the Roman period, while the presence of structures in the medieval period is suggested by the presence of an architectural fragment and a door key.

The small finds have undergone basic recording procedures including preliminary identification of function and date range; scale record drawings and an assessment of conservation needs. The oak planks have been recorded and a sample retained in waterlogged conditions in light of the potential for future work.

Overall the preservation of the non-ceramic artefacts is good and few require further treatment. However, the corrosion present on the seven iron objects does mask diagnostic features and radiography is required in order to confirm identification of function and more closely date these finds. Costings for this will be in the region of £70.00 (including transport). Radiography could be delayed if further excavations are to be undertaken. If this does not occur, radiography should be undertaken in the near future.

Flint material consisted of waste flakes associated with tool manufacture and two tools were also found. These consisted of a small flake with a cutting edge and is probably some sort of knife. A second tool consists of a sickle blade that was likely to have been hafted into a wooden handle. These tools date to the later Neolithic or Bronze Age (c. 2000 - 800 BC). Most of the waste flakes also date to this period, although a small number are earlier and date to the late Mesolithic and early Neolithic (c 6000-3000 BC). The raw materials used for flint manufacture range from poor quality river gravel flint, that was probably of local source, to better quality material from chalkland regions.

ANIMAL BONE

Animal bone was a relatively common find at Yielden and in general terms the preservation condition was very good. A total of two boxes of bone was found. This material was washed and a preliminary study revealed the following observations. Cattle, sheep, pig and horse, together with fowl (probably chicken) were found in contexts ranging in date from the Roman period through to the post-medieval period. Information relating to the ageing (and possibly sexing) of the animals was clearly available. In addition butchery information, such as chopmarks, was also clearly visible. Large scale fieldwork would produce a very informative animal bone assemblage relating to the evolution of animal husbandry techniques in a rural setting.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The High Street site has demonstrated an almost continuous sequence of activity from the neolithic period through to the 18th or 19th centuries. All but a small part of the site (that not due to be built on) shows intensive occupation.

The survival of a prehistoric ground surface and flint artefacts dating to the neolithic and bronze ages indicate the potential for occupation evidence being present.

The Roman features may indicate that the site is only on the edge of the main settlement, possibly a villa site, but there is intense activity evidenced by a complex ditch pattern which is only partly understood. There may be more than one focus in evidence.

Of particular importance is the discovery of 8th -9th century Maxey Ware pottery in association with structural evidence indicating a Middle Saxon settlement of some kind. Such activity has proved to be extremely elusive throughout the county, and its significance is proportionately enhanced by its rarity.

The medieval evidence is also only partly understood, but there are clear indications of a substantial series of masonry features, possibly representing a defended site. Its relationship to the castle is an important, but unanswered question.

The post medieval period appears to be restricted to the 17th century and later. Two aspects are of significance here. One is the discovery of quantities of well preserved waterlogged wood, indicating more deposits of similar quality. The other is the possibility of retrieving an above average assemblage of animal bone from a restricted period, and one which is of particular interest to those academics researching into aspects of animal husbandry. The possibility of finding waterlogged deposits belonging to other periods is also there.

The recommendation therefore has to be that discussions should take place with the developer to determine whether there are any mitigation procedures which could reduce the amount of archaeological damage. This would in turn reduce the cost of archaeological recording which would otherwise need to be on a large scale. Should mitigation not be possible because of the nature of the development, area excavation should take place over much of the site in order to retrieve the sequence of activity and to understand its complex patterning.

Reference

Simco A 1984 Survey of Bedfordshire: The Roman Period Bedfordshire County Council and Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.