Archaeological assessment of Blackwardine Roman settlement, Hereford and Worcester

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with contributions by Derek Hurst and Elizabeth Pearson

Summary

The Roman settlement of Blackwardine was surveyed during the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey, a desk-based study of 64 smaller historic towns in Shropshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. Archaeological evidence relating to the settlement was carefully analysed, comprising topographic data, published and unpublished archaeological reports, museum collections, historical maps, and field data recorded by the project team.

Detailed evidence is provided on the character and layout of the settlement in the Roman period. The available information is analysed and mapped in detail, and a model of the development of the town is proposed. In addition, the evidence for pre-urban occupation is considered, together with evidence of later occupation. All archaeologically-relevant information has been recorded as part of the county Sites and Monuments Record. Specialist assessments of artefacts and ecofacts are included. A detailed archaeological research framework has been developed for Blackwardine, which will inform future archaeological investigations as well as management decisions.

The core of Blackwardine contains buried archaeological deposits, and these are judged to have high potential. There is high potential for the recovery of artefact assemblages, and moderate potential for the recovery of ecofact assemblages. There may be local survival of waterlogged deposits, which are rare in the region.

1 Introduction

1.1 Location and landuse

The Roman settlement of Blackwardine is located at NGR SO 534 567 in Leominster District. The area is now a greenfield site situated between the villages of Stoke Prior to the west and Humber to the east.

1.2 Topography, geology and soils

Blackwardine lies at a height of between 100m and 120m OD on a plateau slightly raised above the level of the Humber Brook to the east. The soils are typically argillic or stagnogleyic brown earths of the Escrick 1 association developed in reddish till (Soil Survey of England and Wales, Ragg *et al* 1984) overlying Devonian red mudstone and sandstone of the St. Maughan's Formation (British Geological Survey 1:250,000, sheet 52°N-O.4°W).

1.3 Chronological outline

Unstratified coin and pottery evidence suggests that the Romano-British settlement at Blackwardine developed at some time in the later 1st century (Brown 1988), although the earliest stratified deposit dates from the 2nd century (Brown 1988). The reasons for the development of a settlement here are obscure. The "small town" may have grown from the *vicus* of a fort, or from a purely civilian settlement on a military road (Brown 1988). The limited archaeological evidence available precludes meaningful discussion of the development of the town but it does appear that an area of the settlement may have been defended in the 2nd century, and that fairly dense occupation continued into the 4th century (Brown 1988). Coin and pottery evidence and comparison with the town of Kenchester to the south suggests that occupation continued into the 5th century (Brown 1988, section 6.43).

1.4 Placename studies

The Romano-British name of the town is not known, but the fieldname *Blackwardine* derives from the old English *bloec* meaning black (Field 1972) and *worthign* meaning an enclosure or homestead (M Gelling (pers comm) in Brown 1990b, 390). Nineteenth century antiquarians noted the blackness of the soil (Williams 1808), and Brown (1988) suggested that at the time of the Anglian settlement the area was a farming estate with good black soil. The first recorded use of the name is in a 14th century survey by Leominster priory of the chapelry of Stoke (HRO M31/8-9, D L Brown pers comm).

"Blackwardine" fieldnames, recorded on the tithe award, cover a large area to the east of the main north-south road. "Broadstone" field names on the tithe map are situated in the northern part of the settlement. It has been suggested that these may refer to the makeup of the Roman road or to other masonry structures (Brown 1988).

1.5 Syntheses of documentary and archaeological data

The archaeological data from the site is of poor quality and confused. A comprehensive presentation of the evidence and its possible interpretations has been undertaken by Brown (1988). The present assessment by the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey was carried out in 1994. The text was revised in March 1995 to incorporate the results of fieldwork undertaken by the Survey (see section 1.7). No information published after December 1995 has been incorporated in this assessment.

1.6 Cartographic sources

The tithe map for the parish of Stoke Prior (*HFNS* nd) was used to aid in the identification of remains and the definition of components.

1.7 Archaeological excavations and surveys

The first report of the discovery of archaeological material from Blackwardine was in 1808 when the Rev J Williams noted that "several Roman coins...numerous pieces of pottery, bones of men and animals and numberless other relics have been found upon the spot" (HWCM 21035; Davies Burlton 1885). Since that time there have been reports of the retrieval of numerous sherds and other objects from the plough soil (HWCM 21036; Jack 1909; Jack 1921a; Brown 1961; Shoesmith 1983a).

In 1881 workmen digging a cutting for the Leominster and Bromyard Railway discovered a large number of Roman remains (HWCM 21034; Davies Burlton 1885) including coins, gold jewellry, human and animal bone, querns, millstones, pottery, shell and "about 30 ovens full of ashes". Unfortunately the position of the finds was not recorded and most were dispersed (Davies Burlton 1885, 341).

The first "archaeological" excavation of the site was undertaken in 1910 by members of the Woolhope Club. The location of the work is not known but in three hours "a few openings in the surface" were achieved and pottery, human bone, flint and other items were recovered (HWCM 3854; Pilley 1910, 183). In 1921 the Woolhope Club returned and "with two hours at their command several members, aided by some Blackwardine men, commenced excavations in the centre of a root field". The location of this excavation is not known but quantities of finds were recovered including roofing tiles and masonry (HWCM 21037; Jack 1921a; Jack 1921b).

In 1975 excavations in an area known to contain masonry and to be rich in finds (HWCM 737) were begun by W F Attwell. The excavation and recording techniques were not considered to be up to modern standards and the site was scheduled in 1976. Attwell continued to excavate around the scheduled area until 1979 or 1980. The not inconsiderable results of his work have not been published in any more than outline form and there is some concern as to the accuracy of the interpretation (HWCM 21038; Attwell 1976; Attwell 1989; Brown 1990; Attwell 1991, HWCC SMR file HWCM 737).

In 1980-81 the site of the 19th century railway cutting was being cutback and filled with rubbish and a watching brief was undertaken by the County Archaeological Service. Not all features were recorded, however, and the section to the west of NGR SO 5325 seems not to have been examined (HWCM 3201; Brown 1988).

Aerial photographs of the area have been taken since the 1950's (HWCM 3706, 3707, 3986, 6006).

Fieldwork was undertaken by the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey in October 1994. This investigated and revised the extent of the components and recorded 18th and 19th century cellarage and 20th century developments within the urban area.

1.8 Acknowledgments and personnel

Duncan Brown provided useful information and insights for this report. Survey fieldwork was carried out by Victoria Buteux and Nigel Topping. Analysis and report writing were carried out by Victoria Buteux, and this report was edited by Hal Dalwood.

2 Pre-urban evidence

There is considerable evidence for pre-Roman activity in the area of Blackwardine and a number of flints have been found during excavations and fieldwalking on the site of the town (HWCM 3201, HWCM 3854, HWCM 21036). The Iron Age hillfort of Risbury Camp is just 2km to the southeast and aerial photography has identified enclosures at Blackwardine (HWCM 6006, HWCM 3986) which may pre-date the Romano-British settlement. It is possible, therefore, that there was a native settlement on the site prior to the late 1st century.

3 Roman archaeological evidence

3.1 Roman remains and buildings

There are no standing structures of Roman date at Blackwardine but the accidental discovery of features during the construction of the railway cutting in 1881 and excavations in this century have demonstrated that remains of buildings, boundary ditches and pits do survive in the area of the Roman town.

3.2 Roman urban components

Analysis of the evidence summarised above indicates the existence of three urban components. The characteristics of these urban components are summarised below.

Street system (HWCM 21039). The only known Roman road runs north-south through, or next to, the settlement of Blackwardine (HWCM 3870). It has been suggested that an east-west route exists and that the town is positioned on, or close to, a military crossroads as is the case at Kenchester (Brown 1988). The location of this supposed east-west route has not been identified, however (Brown 1988, section 6.15, Brown 1989, 19; Attwell 1989, 21). What evidence there is from the watching brief at the railway cutting (HWCM 3201; Brown 1988) suggests that the layout of the settlement was not regular. Small tracks and roads probably existed linking buildings and yards to the main street or streets but no archaeological or aerial photographic evidence for these has been found.

Occupation areas (HWCM 21040, HWCM 21041). From the available archaeological and aerial photographic evidence it is not possible to map the extent of the settlement at Blackwardine with any accuracy and the two occupation area components have been drawn to include rather than define the town. The component to the east of the road (HWCM 21041) has been drawn to include the Blackwardine and Broadstone fieldnames (see section 1.4).

Artefactual evidence from fields to the east of the Roman road (HWCM 21041) indicates that Blackwardine was occupied from the late first to the early 5th century. Deposits observed in the railway cutting (HWCM 3201, HWCM 21034) suggest that this occupation was relatively dense but that there was no uniformity of plan (Brown 1988). Timber and stone buildings were constructed with stone and tile roofs. Evidence for hypocausts, painted wall plaster and possibly mosaic floors suggests some higher status buildings within the urban area. Boundary ditches existed and there is some indication that part of the settlement was defended perhaps in the later 2nd century (Brown 1988). With the exception of the pottery kiln excavated by Attwell (1991), the published finds provide no evidence of industrial activity. No report on this kiln and its associated material has been published, however, and its interpretation as a pottery kiln as opposed to an oven is still doubtful. The "thirty ovens full of ashes" reported to have been discovered in 1881 (Davies Burlton 1885) are usually interpreted as the remains of a hypocaust but some other function is possible.

Almost nothing is known of the area to the west of the road (HWCM 21040). There are no recorded "Blackwardine" field-names in this area, although occupation could be expected to the west of the road if Blackwardine was situated on a crossroads.

Whilst human bones have been recovered from Blackwardine the exact location and extent of the cemetery is not known. No graves were found during the 1980-81 watching brief on the east end of the railway cutting which suggests that the cemetery found by the 19th century navvies was further west possibly on either side of the Roman road.

3.3 Roman urban form

Definition and classification. The Roman urban form (HWCM 21042) has been defined and mapped, based on the extent of the identified urban components. The available evidence indicates that the Roman urban form of Blackwardine can be classified as a Roman small town (English Heritage 1992).

Survival. The site of the Roman town was probably used as a source of building

materials and curios by the local people over the centuries. The place name "Blackwardine" may refer to black soil (see section 1.4) and the black soil was commented on by Williams in the early 19th century (Williams 1808). The soil in the area no longer appears black and it may be assumed that this is the result of later 19th and 20th century ploughing. It is very likely therefore that the top of the Roman deposits have been damaged.

Despite this depredation by robbing and ploughing the watching brief (HWCM 3201) and recent excavations (HWCM 21038) have demonstrated that substantial archaeological deposits do survive within the area of the Roman town. These deposits can lie close to the present ground surface and are between 0.5m and 2m thick with exceptional features such as a well and large ditch being 5m deep or deeper (Brown 1988, section 3.4). It is possible that waterlogged deposits of Roman date may survive next to the Humber Brook. With the exception of the Roman road the components of the urban form cannot be readily identified as they do not survive above ground level.

4 Post-Roman archaeological evidence

Archaeological evidence suggests that Blackwardine was occupied until at least the early 5th century. By the 7th to 8th centuries placename evidence suggests that the site was no longer recognisable as a town (see section 1.4). Brown suggests that the centre of population may have moved to the more easily defended Risbury Camp or to Leominster (Brown 1988, section 6.43).

5 Specialist assessments

5.1 Artefactual evidence J D Hurst

A considerable amount of artefactual evidence is available for Blackwardine. The earliest artefacts from the study area are flints (HWCM 3201; Brown 1990b, 400; HWCM 3854; HWCM 21036) but most artefacts are of Roman date. The range of object types is large and includes a variety of ceramics, domestic refuse, millstones, building materials, coins and jewellry. Both the ceramic and numismatic evidence indicate that the settlement was occupied throughout the Roman period. With the exception of a Byzantine coin of the later 10th to early 11th century (HWCM 21036), no finds of post-Roman date have been recorded.

5.2 Environmental evidence E A Pearson

The majority of the fieldwork carried out at Blackwardine has been undertaken by amateur archaeologists who have not recorded the stratigraphic sequence nor employed a systematic sampling strategy for environmental remains. Environmental evidence is, therefore, mostly confined to observations of the presence of biological remains, with little identification and analysis.

Human burials. The most significant find of human remains was the large number of burials discovered by workmen during the building of the Leominster and Bromyard railway in the 19th century (HWCM 21034). It was reported that these were all doubled up in a sitting position at various depths below the surface but this observation was refuted by a supposed eyewitness (Davies Burlton 1885, 341).

Large numbers of human bones were also discovered by members of the Woolhope society in their excavations in 1910 (HWCM 3854; Pilley 1910, 183). During the 1921 excavations human teeth and small human bones, possibly the ribs of a child were found in a stone-lined cavity (HWCM 21037; Jack 1921a, 1921b). The location of these

excavations is not known.

Animal bones. Observations of animal bone were made by workmen in the 19th century (HWCM 21034; Davies Burlton 1885) and by members of the Woolhope Club in 1921 (HWCM 21037; Jack 1921b). Preliminary analysis of animal bone from the watching brief on the railway cutting in 1980-81 identified the presence of common domesticates and presented some simple statistical analyses (HWCM 737; Brown 1988).

Molluscs. Oyster shells, which are more frequently found in large quantities on Roman sites than on sites of any other period, were found in cartloads by workmen in the 19th century (HWCM 21034; Davies Burlton 1885) and were also recovered during fieldwork in 1921 (HWCM 21037; Jack 1921b).

6 Archaeological research framework

6.1 Model of urban development

A model of the Roman town of Blackwardine has been produced which is predictive and capable of testing through archaeological investigation. This model has both chronological and spatial (landuse) dimensions (see sections 2 to 4) and is based on an analysis of cartographic and archaeological sources. The model is derived from the current academic understanding of urban development in Britain, and forms one element of a developing regional research framework. The model is provisional and will be subject to confirmation or revision in the future as new information becomes available, or new studies lead to changing understandings of towns in the region.

6.2 Chronological framework

The archaeological dating evidence at Blackwardine is so poor that, at present, any attempt to define a chronology of the settlement would be of little value. A programme of properly conducted fieldwork would radically alter our knowledge of the origin, development and demise of the town.

6.3 Urban landuse

The Roman components identified here (section 3.2) have been mapped and constitute a model of urban landuse for the Roman period. This landuse models is partial and provisional and capable of testing through archaeological investigation.

The occupation area components have been archaeologically investigated to a certain extent but the methods used and the lack of proper publication of the results means that they provide little information on the origin, function, form or extent of the town of Blackwardine. Brown's synthesis of the results of this work is comprehensive (Brown 1988) but a properly conducted programme of fieldwork is necessary before any real understanding of the town can be achieved.

6.4 Potential for survival of buried remains

It has been demonstrated that substantial and significant archaeological deposits survive in Blackwardine. These are often located beneath relatively shallow plough soil and are easily damaged. The deposits contain datable artefactual and environmental assemblages and any surviving deposits to the east of the core area may be waterlogged. The potential of the buried archaeological deposits in Blackwardine is very great as so little is known of the layout, function, development and decline of the town or of its relationship with the surrounding countryside and other centres of population.

Fieldwork was undertaken by the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey in October 1994. The extent of 18th and 19th century cellarage was mapped, together with the extent of 20th century development (new buildings and major landscaping work). This showed that there was no observable cellarage and little modern redevelopment within the historic core.

6.5 Potential for artefactual studies J D Hurst

Much of the fieldwork carried out so far at Blackwardine has not been fully reported, and more information has been presented about artefacts than about the associated stratigraphy. It is clear, from the extent and density of artefacts, that occupation was on a considerable scale.

Period discussion. Only a few prehistoric flints have been recovered from the area of the town. This material is unlikely to be indicative of occupation.

Roman artefacts have been recorded from Blackwardine since the early 19th century. A particularly rich discovery occurred during the construction of the railway in the 1880s when part of a cemetery (HWCM 21034) was excavated by the railway navvies. Finds here included a gold bracelet and ring, and many artefacts. A dig by the Woolhope Club produced pottery, coins, roofing tile, *tesserae,* and flint. This collection has been considerably extended, both in quantity and the range of objects represented, by the more recent work of Attwell (1989, 1991). Although these latest finds have not been fully published, it is nonetheless clear that archaeological deposits at Blackwardine contain exceptional artefactual evidence for the Roman period.

The quality of Roman deposits at Blackwardine is indicated by the quantity of finds, range of object types, and the quality of some individual objects. The first is confirmed by the numerous metal objects cited by Attwell (1989). Even the limited archaeological fieldwork undertaken in 1981 (Brown 1990b) produced a Roman pottery assemblage of medium size (714 sherds). The exceptional range of object types (and therefore activities) is demonstrated by the presence of objects rarely found elsewhere in the region. These include lead glazed Roman pottery (Rees 1990, 399), a shale bowl (Hurst 1990, 404), and a large collection of possible military metalwork (Attwell 1989).

The coin collection is large by local standards, and indicates that occupation was probably present throughout the Roman period. A similar conclusion has been reached from the ceramic evidence. The presence of so much dating evidence is unusual on Roman sites in the region.

Attwell (1991) has identified a pottery kiln at Blackwardine dating to the late 4th century. The evidence for this has not yet been fully published, and so its products have not been described in detail. However, the apparent lack of wasters and the location of the kiln inside a building suggests that it may be useful to review this identification.

6.6 Potential for environmental remains E A Pearson

Most of the archaeological evidence results from antiquarian finds and observations, and there has been no wet-sieving of samples for environmental remains. This means that a limited range of biological material has been recovered, and there is, therefore, little indication of the full potential for environmental archaeological research.

As the soils are well-drained they are not likely to provide good conditions for the preservation of waterlogged organic remains, although some waterlogged deposits may survive along the Humber Brook. Such material may provide information relating to the surrounding environment and to dumped occupational rubbish, particularly if there was occupation close to the Brook. Good preservation of faunal remains such as animal bone and molluscs has been demonstrated by previous fieldwork and can be expected in

soils of this association which are frequently calcareous at depth.

The discovery of a hypocaust or kiln described as "like about thirty ovens full of ashes" (Davies Burlton 1885, 341) during the construction of the railway cutting in the 19th century may mean that charred plant remains were present. Such features, if encountered in the future, could be a valuable source of charred cereal crop remains. These can be found in both ovens or hypocausts due to the deliberate burning of cereal waste as fuel. In ovens their presence can also be due to accidental burning of cereal products during the parching which was part of the crop processing process. Such material can provide valuable information on the importance of different cereal crops and crop processing activities on a site.

The presence of black soil frequently noted in the locality of Roman occupation, particularly by 19th century antiquarians (Williams 1808, Davies Burlton 1885) raises the question of whether this resembles "dark earth", a homogeneous dark humic soil, frequently containing few artefacts or other inclusions which commonly seals Roman occupation deposits in many towns. Without detailed descriptions of this black soil it is difficult to assess whether the comparison to dark earth is valid. Soil micromorphology has previously provided valuable information on the nature of such soils and would be a useful research tool should these deposits be encountered as a result of future fieldwork.

As few environmental remains have been recovered in Blackwardine, any environmental material from archaeologically relevant features would be of significance. Such remains would provide information on diet, living conditions and agricultural or industrial economy. Future excavation should include a policy of sampling and wet-sieving soil during excavation in conjunction with hand-collection of larger items.

6.7 Summary of research potential

The core of Blackwardine contains buried archaeological deposits, and these are judged to have high potential. There is high potential for the recovery of artefact assemblages, and moderate potential for the recovery of ecofact assemblages. There may be local survival of waterlogged deposits, which are rare in the region.

7 Management framework

7.1 Urban archaeological area

The mapped extent of the Roman urban form defined above indicated the extent of the urban area (Blackwardine Urban Archaeological Area). The significance of the urban archaeological area is assessed below.

7.2 Existing protection measures

The archaeological urban area of Blackwardine has been defined above. The different parts of the urban area are afforded different measures of protection through legislation and the planning process. Directly relevant measures are outlined below.

Scheduled ancient monument. There is one Scheduled Ancient Monument in Blackwardine (Here and Worc no 222). It is possible that following the current Monument Protection programme English Heritage may modify the scheduled area or add other monuments in Blackwardine to the schedule.

7.3 Management approach

The archaeological urban area of Blackwardine contains buried remains relating to Roman occupation, associated with contemporary buildings. The buried remains vary in complexity and depth, and demonstrably contain significant archaeological information. It is desirable that any proposed development within the urban area that has a potential impact on buried remains should be assessed by the appropriate archaeological body as early as possible in the planning process.

The course of action recommended will depend upon the nature of the development and current planning legislation and frameworks. The archaeological response will be framed using both the archaeological information summarised in this document and any subsequent information recorded on the Sites and Monuments Record, supplemented by other sources as and when available.

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9 Mapping

The illustrations for this report comprise CAD plots of the urban components for each period and a location plot of archaeological remains combined with OS digital map data (1995) at 1:5000. These plots are current at the date of the completion of this report (March 1995). After this date new information will be held by the Hereford and Worcester County Council Sites and Monuments Record.

* Historic buildings (listed and other recorded buildings) and urban area
* Archaeological remains and urban area
* Roman urban form and components
* Observed cellarage and 20th century development
* Urban area and scheduled ancient monuments