terrain archaeology

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SOUTH WALKS CSO, DORCHESTER, DORSET

Archaeological Observations and Recording

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South Walks CSO, Dorchester, Dorset
Archaeological Observations and Recording, January 2002

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South Walks CSO, Dorchester, Dorset
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SUMMARY

Archaeological observations were undertaken during sewerage improvement works at the junction of South Street and South Walks, Dorchester, on the line of the Roman town defences. No trace of the defences was encountered. However, Roman road gravels were observed at a depth of 1 m, overlying earlier soil deposits lying directly on top of undisturbed chalk bedrock. The alignment of the road was not determined, but it is probably part of the southern approach road to the town. These discoveries add credence to the hypothesis that this is the area of the south gate of the Roman town.

Traces of a robbed-out building of possible 18th century date were found overlying the Roman road gravels. This building has been identified on an 1810 map of Dorchester.

INTRODUCTION

This project was commissioned by Wessex Water following advice from Steven Wallis, Senior Archaeologist, Dorset County Council.

The groundworks comprised the excavation of a hole approximately 6.5 m by 4.5 m down to a maximum depth of about 2.4 m. This hole exposed the existing sewer chamber to the east and the edge of the existing bifurcation chamber to the west.

The site is at the southern end of South Street, Dorchester, where it curves round to meet Trinity Street and adjacent to South Walks Road at Ordnance Survey NGR SY 6919 9034 (Figure 1). It lies on the line of South Walks, which marks the line of the Roman defences of Dorchester. The site is flat and lies at a height of about 64 m OD. The underlying geology is mapped as Upper Chalk (Geological Survey of Great Britain1: 50,000 Sheet 328 *Dorchester* 1981).

The fieldwork was carried out between 8th–25th January 2002 by Paul Pearce.

Terrain Archaeology would like to acknowledge the following for their help and cooperation during this project: Frances Clayton and Tony West (Wessex Water); Michael Lloyd (Oscar Faber); Jane Lewis and the groundworkers (Brent).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Archaeological observations were carried out by Wessex Archaeology during the construction of the original manhole chamber in 1990. The exposed sections revealed, "1 m of modern made ground over 0.6 m of natural flint gravel and clay loam above undisturbed chalk" (Davies and Farwell 1990, 53). It was thought that the flint gravels represent the remnants of a Roman road.

The site lies on the projected line of the Roman road from Weymouth, which broadly follows the present Weymouth Avenue (Plate 1). It is also on the line of the defences of the Roman town of *Durnovaria*, in the vicinity of the projected location of the south gate of the town (Figure 2). The lines of a number of roads are known within the Roman town but it is unclear precisely which

roads met the southern approach road into the town. No archaeological trace of the south gate has yet been discovered.

The course of the Roman defences is marked by The Grove and West Walks to the west, South Walks and Bowling Alley Walk to the south, and by Salisbury Walk to the east. Earthwork remains of the bank are visible on the west and east sides of this circuit.

There have been numerous small-scale investigations of these defences, particularly to the east and to the south. These have shown that the defences consisted of an earthen bank and ditch system probably constructed in the later 2nd century AD, with a stone wall added to the front at a later date (RCHME 1970, 542–51). On the eastern side, excavations in Colliton Park showed that the bank was about 24 m wide and constructed from alternate layers of chalk rubble and soil ('clay') (RCHME 1970, 545–8). On the southern side the investigations have been more numerous but more piecemeal (RCHME 1970; Woodward and Pearce 1985; Smith 1989; Davies and Farwell 1990). Here too the bank appears to consist of layers of chalk rubble and grey silty clay.

Subsequent to the Roman period the defences fell into decay. They formed the boundary between the town of Dorchester and the Manor of Fordington.

The East Walks (or Salisbury Walk), together with South Walks, were created in 1743–4 (Pope 1918). The banks were levelled for gravel paths and planted with trees.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of the archaeological observations was to establish and make available information about the archaeological resource existing on the site.

The archaeological works aimed to observe and record all the in situ archaeological deposits and features revealed during the groundworks to an appropriate professional standard.

METHODS

The observations were carried out in compliance with the specification prepared by Terrain Archaeology (Document T3068, October 2001) and in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (1994, rev. 1999).

The location of the groundworks was surveyed by taped measurements from the existing buildings. All depths have been recorded as below present ground levels.

After the machine excavation of the trench by the contractors, the sides were roughly straightened and cleaned by hand to facilitate identification and recording of archaeological deposits.

All archaeological deposits and features exposed during the works were recorded using components of the Terrain Archaeology recording system of complementary written, drawn and photographic records.

The records have been compiled in a stable, cross-referenced and fully indexed archive in accordance with current UKIC guidelines and the requirements of the receiving museum, Dorset County Museum.

RESULTS

The works resulted in an irregular, lozenge-shaped trench, approximately 6.5 m long (east to west) by 4.5 m wide (north to south), against the eastern edge of the existing road, and partially encroaching onto the adjacent grass verge (Figure 3).

The depth of excavation around the existing sewer chamber on its northern, eastern and southern sides was *c.* 0.80 m to 0.90 m (sufficient to raise the cover without the ingress of debris), whilst excavation in the western quadrant reached its maximum depth *c.* 2.4 m below the present road surface.

Limited exposure of archaeological deposits occurred in both the northern and southern sides of the trench. The eastern and western sides, on the other hand, showed only modern disturbance to their full excavated depth.

The northern (south-facing) section was exposed to a depth of about 0.9 m, except at its western end, where a narrow strip of surviving archaeological deposits was observed down to a depth of about 2.0 m (Figure 4). The southern (north-facing) section comprised a vertical strip *c.* 1 m wide, of surviving stratigraphy, which was cut to the west by another modern brick-built sewer chamber and was obscured by modern infill and overburden to the east (Figure 5, Plate 3). The east section was recorded but will not be discussed further here as only modern deposits were revealed. It is illustrated in Figure 4 and the list of contexts can be found in Appendix 1.

The following account of the exposed stratigraphy attempts to relate the contexts exposed on the northern and southern sides of the trench and present them within a chronological framework. A matrix showing the stratigraphic relationships of all exposed contexts is presented in Figure 6. The chronology is very tentative as there is virtually no dating evidence to support the sequence.

Natural deposits

At the western end of the northern section, hard, 'blocky' natural chalk was exposed at a depth of 1.75 m below the present road surface. In the southern section, the natural chalk was 1.06 m below the present ground surface.

Pre-Roman or Early Roman?

A small number of deposits were identified in both the north and south sections, which may be prehistoric or very early Roman in date, based on their stratigraphic position (Figure 6). These deposits lay directly on the chalk bedrock and were sealed by layers of flint metalling, thought to be part of a 1st century AD Roman road. No dating evidence was recovered from these deposits, so their precise date remains uncertain.

On the northern side of the trench was a 0.35 m thick deposit of dark brown loam (20) with common small chalk pieces and occasional flint lying directly on top of the natural chalk. To the south, the natural chalk was cut by a sloping-sided feature filled with a layer of slightly weathered chalk rubble (34), directly above the natural chalk, and a layer of dark brown silty clay loam (33) with common small chalk pieces, above. Not enough of this feature was exposed to be certain of its size, shape or orientation.

Roman

In the northern part of the trench, layer 20 was sealed by a 0.40 m thickness of substantial metalling, comprising three distinct layers of very compact coarse flint and gravel (19,18 and 17), capped by a 0.11 m thickness of large nodular flints in heavily compacted or rammed chalk (16). These metalled surfaces were only exposed in the deeper western end of the section.

In the southern section, a 0.19 m thick deposit of very compact, mixed gravel and soil (32), overlay the natural chalk and sealed the fills 33 and 34. On top of this was a 0.15 m thick layer of compacted chalk and flint (31).

The flint metalling layers 17–19 are likely to be part of a Roman road, on the basis of their character, location and stratigraphic position. The gravel layer 32 in the south part of the trench may also be the remains of a Roman road. The rammed chalk and flint layers 16 and 31, on top of the road metalling, may represent a later resurfacing of the road. No dating evidence was recovered from these layers.

Post-Roman/ Medieval?

Overlying the Roman road deposits in the south end of the trench was a 0.14 m thick layer of firm brownish-grey loam (30). This soil has been tentatively identified as a medieval soil that developed after the abandonment of the Roman town.

On the northern side of the trench, it is more difficult to identify a similar deposit, but a similar layer of brownish-grey silty clay loam (15) lies in a similar stratigraphic position immediately on top of the Roman road surface (Figure 4). Overlying this were two further similar brownish-grey silty clay layers (13, 14), distinguished by differing quantities of chalk flecks and flint. As these layers only survived in a very small area at the western end of the northern side of the trench, it is difficult to interpret their full significance.

Post-medieval

The layers of brownish-grey silty clay loam (13, 14 and 15) described above were cut by a vertical-sided, flat-bottomed feature (9), filled with brownish-grey silty clay loam (8). The base of the cut lay directly on the rammed chalk and flint layer 16. The plan shape and orientation of this feature did not survive but it is pertinent to note that the deposits were different on either side of this feature. The soil layers 13–15) to the west have already been described above. On the eastern side of feature 9, the lowest exposed deposit was a layer of coarse flint and limestone rubble (7), supporting a rammed chalk floor (6). To the west were the remains of a later replacement rammed chalk surface (5), separated by a thin layer of ashy silt (35). Two small pieces of grey slate were recovered from silt layer 35, suggesting a post-medieval date for these surfaces. The relationship between the chalk floors and feature 9 is unclear — it is not certain whether they are contiguous or whether feature 9 cuts the floors. Both chalk floors became thinner towards the east before petering out, though it is unclear whether this is a result of wear or later disturbance. The resultant hollow was filled with a thin layer of pale grey silty loam (4).

The most likely interpretation of these deposits is that they are the remains of a building. Feature 9 probably is the remnants of a trench robbing out the western wall and that layers 5 and 6 are surviving floors inside. The pieces of slate within the floor suggest that this building is firmly post-medieval in date.

On the south side of the trench, there were a number of deposits that may be contemporary with the building. Overlying soil layer 30 were two similar, thin (less than 0.10 m thick) layers of very compact flint gravel (29 and 28), capped by a 0.07 m thick layer of very compact rammed chalk (27). If it is assumed that the building was oriented similarly to the buildings on either South Street or South Walks, then the area of the south section would be external. It is possible that the gravel and chalk layers represent a yard or path surface.

The floor surfaces within the building were covered by a 0.38 m thick layer of brownish-grey soil (3), containing material of late post-medieval date, including two sherds of probable 18th century earthenware, (Jo Draper, pers. comm.), wine bottle glass, brick fragments, nails, and animal bone.

Modern

A water-pipe trench (12), and another late feature of uncertain purpose (36), had been cut through layer 3 in the northern part of the trench.

To the south, chalk surface 27 was sealed by a 0.08 m thick deposit of loose chalk rubble (26) containing traces of dark grey silt. Both of these contexts, together with layer 16 and features 9, 12, and 36 were truncated by the construction of the modern road. A 0.3 m thick layer of yellowish grey brown flint gravel (2) formed the base of the road make-up with the modern tarmac (1) above.

Finds

Very few finds were recovered, mainly from context 3. These comprised two sherds (13 g) of post-medieval earthenwares, probably of 18th century date, together with five fragments (266 g) of brick, 27 g of animal bone, two iron nail fragments, and one small piece of bottle glass.

Two small fragments of Welsh roofing slate were found in context 35.

CONCLUSIONS

Clear evidence for the flint gravel make-up of a Roman road was revealed. However, due to the restricted area of undisturbed stratigraphy available for inspection, it is not possible to determine which way the road was running. There was no dating evidence recovered for the road. It was constructed over earlier soil layers lying directly on top of undisturbed natural chalk bedrock. The so-called "natural flint gravel and clay loam" (Davies and Farwell 1990, 53) observed in 1990 was probably part of the Roman road make-up.

The discovery of Roman road gravels, together with the absence of any evidence for a defensive ditch, lends credence to the proposal that this is the position of the south gate of the Roman town.

Given the location of the site, it was rather surprising to find evidence for a post-medieval structure. However, examination of historic maps of Dorchester dating to 1810 and 1848 indicated that during the 19th century the site was on the southeast corner of the junction between the road running along South Walks and the road from Weymouth (Figure 7). Although no information on the size and orientation and precise date of this structure was recovered during the fieldwork, a small building (approximately 3 m by 2 m) is shown on the 1810 map in precisely this position (Figure 6). The small size of this building suggests that it was no more than a booth or shed. Its function is not known but it is interesting to note that there is a similar structure depicted on the western side of the town at the junction of West Walks and Bridport Road, perhaps suggesting that it had something to do with controlling access into the town. Neither building is shown on the 1848 map.

PROJECT ARCHIVE

The archive (Terrain Archaeology Project No. TA5096) will be deposited with Dorset County Museum, which has agreed in principle to accept the archive, subject to fulfilment of the Museum's requirements of the preparation of archaeological archives. A copy of the microfilmed archive will be deposited with the National Monuments Record.

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