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**AXMINSTER  
WOODBURY GREAT CLOSE EXCAVATIONS 1990  
SUMMARY REPORT**

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by

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**Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit**

**Report No. 91.19**

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## Contents

Introduction	1
The excavations	1
Pre-Roman activity	1
Roman military features	2
The Roman roads	2
The later Roman settlement	3
Bibliography	3

## INTRODUCTION

In the winter and spring of 1990 a new water main, running between the village of Musbury and the A35 just east of Axminster in East Devon, was constructed by South West Water. An archaeological watching brief funded by South West Water was mounted along the route of the pipeline by Exeter Museums Archaeological Field Unit. The pipelaying entailed the fencing of a 10m wide working corridor, an 8m width of which was stripped of topsoil. Observations were made along the whole corridor after soil-stripping had been carried out in order to identify buried archaeological features and to recover artefacts.

In the vicinity of Woodbury Farm to the south of Axminster the pipeline passes close to an earthwork protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Devon No. 1031) which lies on the south side of the Roman road from Dorchester to Exeter (roughly followed by modern Woodbury Lane). Limited excavation and fieldwalking on the site in the early 1980s had pointed to the existence here of a substantial Roman settlement of third- to fourth-century date. This was thought to have been the successor to a first-century military site, probably a fort (Bidwell and Silvester 1981).

During the course of the watching brief it became clear that extensive archaeological deposits of Roman date existed in the field (formerly known as Woodbury Great Close) immediately to the west of Woodbury Farm (SY297974). Salvage excavations were therefore carried out along a 2m wide strip in the centre of the corridor prior to the cutting of the pipetrench. These extended over a length of about 210m between Wyke Lane and Woodbury Lane. The excavation phase of the fieldwork was grant-aided by English Heritage, who also provided funds for post-excavation analysis and report preparation.

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## THE EXCAVATIONS

Excavation was undertaken after the area had been stripped of topsoil. Two small areas (Area A 15m x 6m, Area B 16m x 5m) were examined, together with a 2m wide strip (Areas C, D) along the estimated position of the pipetrench throughout one field (i.e. Woodbury Great Close). A small trench was also cut across the line of the former hedgebank dividing Woodbury Great Close from the field to the north-west (Area E), and the pipetrench was examined. Permanent waterlogging of this latter area limited excavation, but the nature and extent of the site was examined.

Roman deposits up to 0.6m deep were found continuously along the length of the pipeline.

### **Pre-Roman activity**

#### *Buried soil*

A layer of buried soil, about 0.20m deep, extended over most of the site. The exception was Area B, at the western end of the field. This soil contained some sherds of Roman pottery and tile but was cut by (i.e. pre-dated) all the features but one examined. It has therefore been interpreted as a contemporary ?ploughsoil. Samples from the soil are being analysed by M. Canti of the Ancient Monuments Laboratory, and V. Straker of Bristol University to determine its possible usage and to glean environmental data.

### *Prehistoric activity*

There are some indications of prehistoric activity on or around the site in the form of lithic artefacts discovered during fieldwalking and excavation. These were all residual finds, i.e. discovered in later contexts. In addition one or two sherds of possible Iron Age pottery were found in later Roman deposits (P. Bidwell pers. comm.). One undated feature, a small pit or ditch revealed in Test Pit A (excavated by machine before topsoil stripping), was the only feature observed to be sealed by the buried soil and may therefore be of prehistoric origin.

### **Roman military features (Fig. 2)**

The outside edge of a large ditch curving from the south to the east was cut by the pipetrench in the field to the north-west of Woodbury Great Close. It was over 2m deep and a minimum of 3m wide. The size, nature and position of this ditch suggest it is the north-west corner of the fort at Woodbury Farm, slightly further north than had previously been thought (Silvester and Bidwell 1984, 35, Fig. 2, 52). Most of the ditch had silted up naturally with approximately a metre of re-deposited natural subsoil as the final infill. The lower fills (below approximately one metre) were permanently waterlogged and rich in waterlogged organic material: macroscopic remains visible leaves, twigs and a hazelnut. Samples were taken for later environmental analysis to be undertaken by Vanessa Straker of Bristol University. The waterlogged nature of the fills leaves the possibility that artefacts made from organic materials may be preserved.

A large ditch approximately 4m wide and 1m deep ran roughly at right angles to the presumed fort ditch. More than 27 metres lay within the area examined. The ditch was cut by the north/south Roman road (see below) and the upper fill (of re-deposited natural) was cut by later Roman features. This may be of military or early Roman date.

A small ditch was sealed by the east/west Roman road (just to the south of Woodbury Lane). This may also be of military or early Roman date. No finds were retrieved.

The other principal feature of first-century date was a ditch (641, Area C) which may have formed the south-eastern corner of a domestic square enclosure.

### **The Roman roads (Fig. 5)**

Parts of two roads, both of likely first-century construction, were cut by the pipetrench. One ran roughly north-west/south-east, to the south of Woodbury Lane (presumed to be part of the Dorchester to Exeter Roman road) at a point where the present road bends to the north. The other road ran north-east/south-west, approximately at right angles on the line of the former hedgebank separating Woodbury Great Close from its neighbour to the north-east. The latter road had been partially robbed. The two roads presumably met outside the north-west corner of the fort.

There is not sufficient evidence as yet to suggest that the north/south road revealed by the excavations was an extension of the Fosse Way. It may merely represent part of a perimeter road around the fort.

Both roads were constructed from large, irregular chert blocks (local stone) including some boulders. Many of the stones were pitched, and some were graded. They were covered with a make-up of gravel up to a depth of 0.56m; no surfaces were found.

### **The later Roman settlement (Figs 3-4)**

Investigations made during pipeline construction have demonstrated that the later Roman settlement site of the predominantly third-fourth century extended about 250m to the west of the scheduled fort and to about 100m south of the Exeter-Dorchester road. Fieldwalking suggests that the full width of the occupation area could be 200m or more. Large quantities of finds have also been recovered from fieldwalking in the fields to the east of the scheduled area, making it clear that the settlement extended for perhaps another 200m in that direction. The total area covered could therefore be in the region of 600m x 200m.

#### *Area A*

Three probable post-pits were found in this area. They were substantial in size and may have formed part of a large building. An entire Exeter Sandy Grey ware jar was found partially buried within the buried soil (Holbrook 1991, Fig. 1, 10).

#### *Area B*

Excavation produced evidence of two buildings in this area. Two post-trenches (673, 751) represented the north-western corner of a rectangular building of timber-frame construction which extended into Area C (648). It would have measured at least 9m x 2m. A possible timber round house was represented by a curving post-trench (656) containing five post holes, with a larger post hole (665) at its eastern terminal. This building was associated with a ditch which was not excavated.

A post-trench (660) just to the south of the round house was partially excavated revealing one post hole. This may represent part of a fence.

In view of the limited area available for investigation in Areas A and B it was not possible to fully reconstruct the plans of the buildings and associated features.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Silvester, R.J and Bidwell, P.T. 1984 'A Roman Site at Woodbury, Axminster', *Proc. Devon Archaeol. Soc.* **42**, 33-57.