RPS Planning, Transport and Environment

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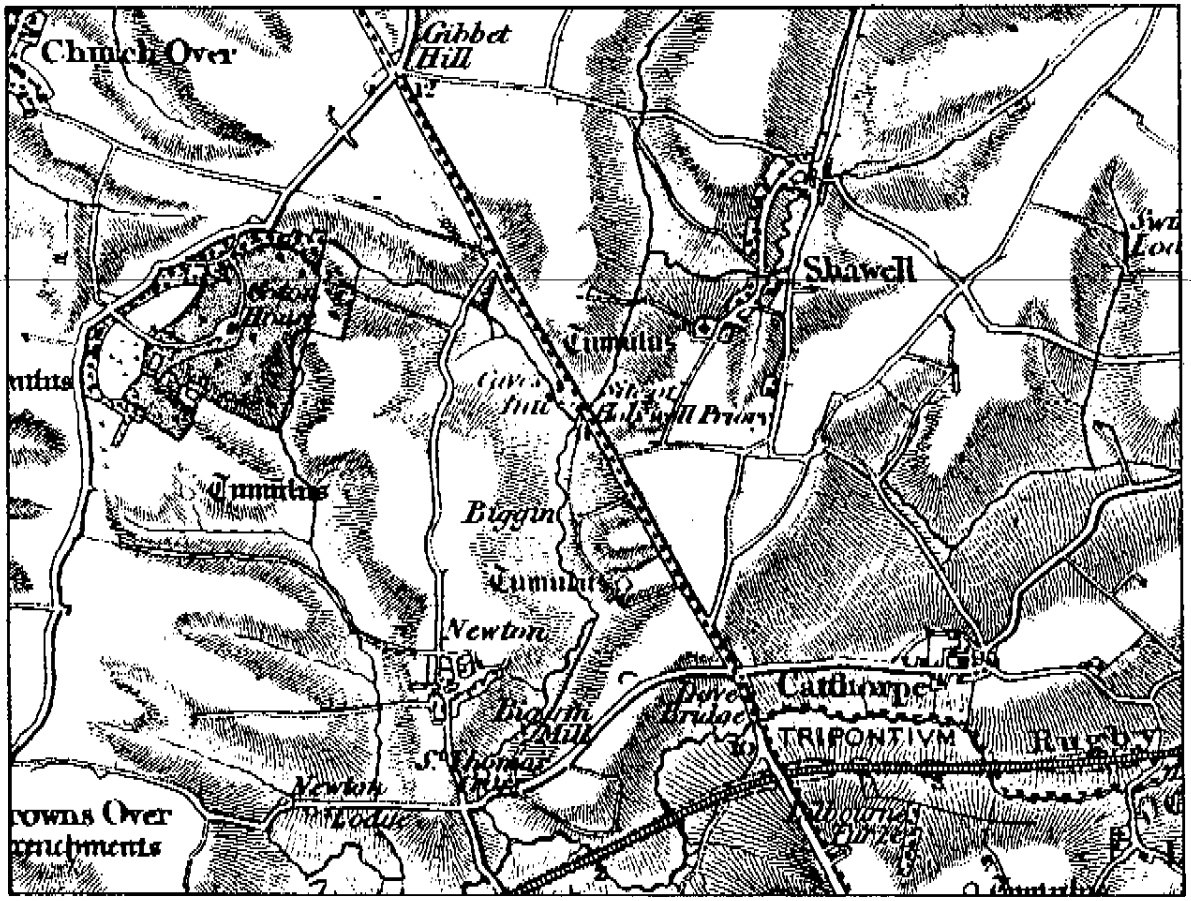
Archaeological Recording at

Caves Inn Bridge,

Churchover, Warwickshire



Warwickshire
County Council
Libraries and Heritage

February 1998

Archaeological Recording at Caves Inn Bridge, Churchover, Warwickshire

Contents

List of Figures

February 1998

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Summary

Archaeological observation of the replacement of Caves Inn Bridge on the A5 Watling Street within the Romano-British settlement of Tripontium found no evidence for the Roman bridge which probably existed here, nor for any other structure earlier than the existing bridge originally built in 1912.

1. Introduction

1.1 In late 1997 Warwickshire County Council Bridges Section began work to replace the Caves Inn road bridge on the A5 Watling Street on behalf of the Highways Agency. Because the bridge lies within an area of archaeological sensitivity, within a Romano-British settlement and on the probable site of Roman and later bridges, the Warwickshire Planning Archaeologist advised that a programme of archaeological recording should be carried out in conjunction with the bridge replacement.

1.2 A programme of fieldwork, agreed with the Planning Archaeologist, was therefore commissioned from the Warwickshire Museum Field Archaeology Section and carried out in November and December 1997. This report presents the results of that programme.

2. Location

2.1 Caves Inn Bridge is located at National Grid Reference SP 536 793 where the A5 crosses a small stream north of the M6, on the boundary between the parishes of Churchover and Newton and Biggin (Fig. 1).

2.2 The underlying geology of the area is grey Lias Mudstone overlaid by Oadby Till, Shawell Sand and Gravel to the west and Alluvium (British Geological Survey 1994).

3. Archaeological and Historical Background

3.1 The A5 at this point follows the line of Watling Street, one of the main highways of Roman Britain. The site also lies in an area where Roman material has been found since the 17th century (Tanner 1936, 26). In fact excavations carried out since 1929, and particularly since 1962 by the Rugby Archaeological Society, have revealed a substantial Romano-British settlement, including a defensive enclosure and an elaborate *mansio* or official posting station with a substantial bath house (Tanner 1939; Pearson 1965; Cameron and Lucas 1969, 1972; Lucas 1981, 1997; Warwickshire Sites and Monuments Record No. WA 2788). The settlement which was occupied from the 1st to the 4th century AD, extends mainly to the north of the stream. Part of it is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Warwickshire No. 97). Material revealed by quarrying in the fields to the south east of the bridge site between 1929 and 1939 suggested that there was also a strip of Roman occupation here c.20m wide extending for c.60m to the south of the stream (Tanner 1939, 29-30). Human remains were found further to the east suggesting a cemetery just beyond the settlement.

3.2 The settlement is identified with the place called *Tripontium* listed on Watling Street in the Antonine Itinerary, a late Roman route guide. The name *Tripontium* implies the presence in this vicinity of three Roman bridges or possibly a bridge with three arches (Tanner 1939, 26). This is the only place in Warwickshire where there is positive evidence for a Roman bridge, although it is likely that there were other

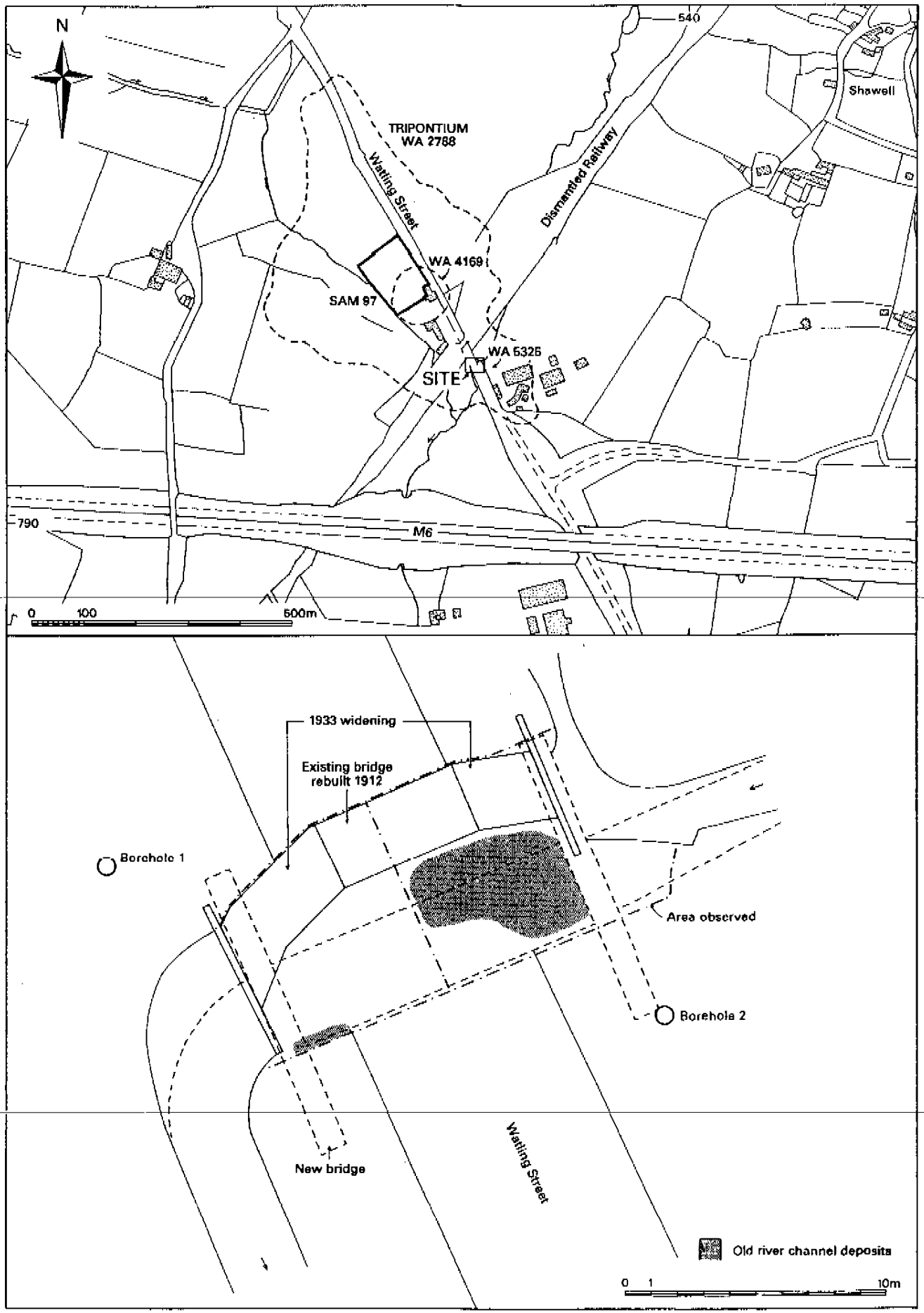

Fig. 1: Site Location and Area Observed

bridges on Watling Street or other major Roman roads such as the Fosse Way or Ryknild Street.

3.3 The quarrying south east of the bridge also a revealed roughly constructed pavement of drift rubble and Lias Limestone was brought to light about 9.1m from the stream and at a depth of 1.37m. Later, during the construction of a dam, several stone blocks were found which were interpreted as possibly the foundations of an early bridge (SMR WA 5325, Tanner 1939, 29-30) although this is an uncertain conclusion and the blocks could have come from another structure entirely.

3.4 Since the end of the Roman period Watling Street has remained one of the main roads in the country and it is probable that any Roman bridge will have decayed and been replaced, probably more than once, in the medieval and post-medieval periods. The name Caves Inn relates to a wayside tavern, first called the New Inn and now a farm, which was situated to the north of the stream on the site of the medieval Holywell Priory (SMR WA 4169). From 1765 until 1871 this section of Watling Street, like most of the main roads in the county, came under the control of a Turnpike Trust which was empowered by Act of Parliament to charge tolls to finance road improvements (Cossons 1946, 91, Pl XVI, no 25). The earliest map to shown a bridge on the existing site seems to be a tithe map of 1847 (WRO CR 569/72) although it does not give any detail. However, the existing unnaturally sharp turn of the stream to the north by the bridge site, which possibly suggests that the stream has been diverted, already existed by this date.

3.5 The bridge became a 'County Bridge' in 1883. The existing structure, which was 18ft (5.49m) wide with a semi-elliptical brick arch with an 8ft span (2.44m), was built in 1912. It was strengthened with a concrete saddle and widened to 46ft (14.02m) in 1932-33 (CH 1959; WRO WCC/4; PTES B34/16).

3.6 As part of the ground investigation for the new bridge two boreholes were sunk on either side of the road (WCC Drawing SWB/744/12C). The western borehole (Fig. 1, 1) hit the natural dark brown Glacial sand and gravel at a depth of 3.7m (99.07m aod). Over the gravel were layers of brown sandy clay, peat and organic material, 1.3m deep, interpreted as alluvium and grey sandy gravel, 0.4m deep, and light brown sandy clay, 1m deep, interpreted as probable made ground. Over this there was a definite make up layer of brown sand and gravel, 0.8m deep, under the modern topsoil and turf, 0.2m deep. The eastern borehole (Fig. 1, 2) also hit natural gravel at a depth of 3.7m (98.67m aod). Here it was overlaid by layers of black silty sandy clay with pockets of peaty silt and gravel, 0.8 deep, and dark brown silty sandy clay and organic material, 2.1m deep. Over this there was a modern make up layer of gravel, sandstone, concrete and ash, 0.8m deep. The clay layers with peat and organic material in each borehole seem consistent with old stream deposits and suggest that the course of the stream may have varied over time.

4. Observation of Bridge Construction

4.1 The new bridge consisted of a concrete box culvert located c.5m to the south east of the existing bridge. The rebuilding work took place in two stages, so as not to interrupt traffic on the A5. The western half of the bridge and carriageway was removed and rebuilt first, followed by the eastern half. In each case an area measuring c.8m x 7-7.5m was excavated to a depth of c.3.75m. Both stages were observed, a total of five visits to the site being made, although the bottoms of the excavations were not seen.

4.2 The existing tarmac road surfaces were between 0.42 and 0.65m thick and their removal revealed the 1932-33 concrete extensions to the bridge and the concrete saddle placed over the brick arch of the 1912 bridge (Fig. 2). To the south east of the

bridge, the tarmac overlay layers of modern gravel and hardcore c.0.45-0.55m thick, which formed the sub-base for the existing road. Beneath these were layers of brown silty clay and yellowish brown sandy clay between 0.3 and 0.68m thick, which may also have been road make-up.

4.3 Below a depth of between 1.25-1.4m there were layers of orange and grey gravel interleaved with grey brown-black silty clay which probably derived from the former stream channel. The silt layers were visible in both parts of the excavation but seemed more extensive to the north east (Fig. 3). The deposits observed were thus similar to those recorded in the boreholes. No Roman or medieval material was observed anywhere in the excavation. A fragment of undated waterlogged timber (not seen) was recovered by the contractors, but other *in situ* waterlogged timbers to the north east were clearly post 1932-33.

5. Conclusions

5.1 No trace of any early structure was found in the excavations relating to Watling Street or to the Romano-British settlement or to a Roman or medieval bridge. It is likely that previous, modern roadworks had removed all trace of early remains in this area. The absence of even any residual Roman finds suggests that the ground had been made up with imported material.

5.2 The somewhat unnatural course of the stream, already evident in 1847, and the extent of old stream channel deposits, suggest that the stream may have been diverted northwards although no trace of any early bridge further to the south east is likely to survive.

Acknowledgements

The Warwickshire Museum would like to thank Warwickshire County Council Bridges Section for commissioning this work and providing copies of the plans. Work on site was carried out by Nicholas Palmer, Bryn Gethin, Robert Jones and Kevin Wright. This report was written by Christopher Jones with drawings by Candy Stevens.

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Fig. 2: Excavations in progress showing brick arch of existing bridge

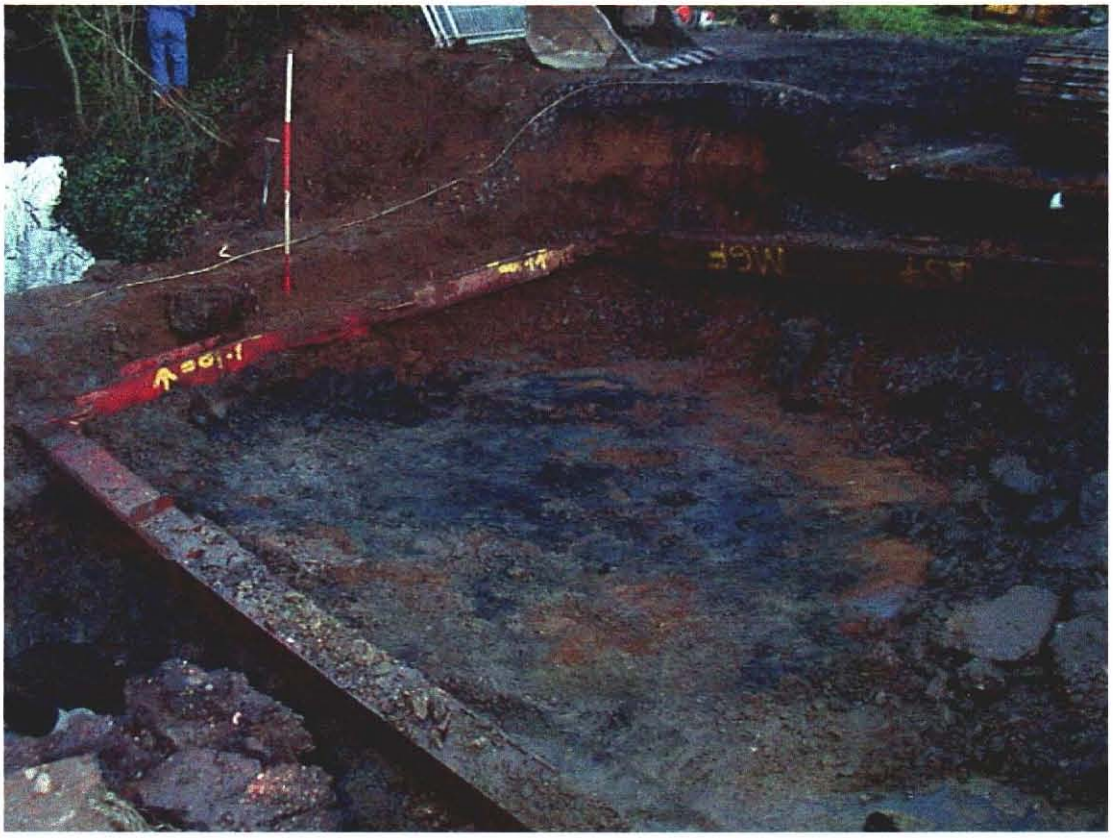

Fig. 3: Old stream channel deposits below road surfaces