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**Archaeological Evaluation  
of former Severn-Trent Depot,  
London Road, Gloucester**

**a report compiled by  
*Gloucester Archaeology***

**on behalf of  
*Severn-Trent Property Ltd*  
and  
*Gloucester City Council***

**Gloucester Archaeology  
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# Archaeological Evaluation of former Severn-Trent Water Depot, London Road, Gloucester

## Introduction

The site formerly used as the Severn-Trent depot on London Road lies within the 'Area of Principal Archaeological Remains' as defined in the Draft Local Plan, Plan 18. Evidence of Roman burials from the cemetery at Wotton has previously been discovered and the site was that of the medieval hospital of St Mary Magdalene.

As a consequence, a desk-top assessment of the site was carried out by the Gloucester Archaeology Unit, on behalf of the site owners, Severn Trent Properties Ltd during November 1992 (Report of November 1992). This was followed by a field assessment in April-May 1993.

## Purpose of Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was *not* to carry out a full excavation of the site but rather to provide corroborative evidence for the conclusions of the desk-top assessment and provide further evidence on which to base a future archaeological strategy for the site. The overriding aim is to seek ways to protect significant archaeological deposits *in situ* by means of collaboration over building siting and design.

## The Site (SO 8435 1895)

The site consists of an area of approx. 4,500 sq.m off the south of London Road and just to the west of the junction of the latter with Denmark Road. The land is currently derelict, with a surface covering of tarmac and concrete. There is an area of open ground against the street frontage. A ground inspection revealed a number of services running across the site, some of which were still live.

## Historical Background

The earliest documented history of the site is as its foundation as St Mary Magdalen's Hospital. This was established as a leper hospital, probably in the early 12th century by Llanthony Priory. The latter used to supply the Hospital weekly with bread. The earliest part of the chapel on the north side of London Road dates from this period. The chapel was originally built on a two cell plan, with the nave demolished in 1861.

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century, the hospital lost its means of support from Llanthony and slipped into great poverty. Eventually it passed into the hands of Gloucester Council on condition that they rebuilt it. James I gave it a charter in 1617, granting it to the City with an annuity of £13 on condition that it was named after him. It then served 19 poor people but by 1662 there were again only 6. The chapel served its own parish in the 16th century. Its burial ground was widely used in the 18th century.

London Road originally ran to the north side of the chapel (as shown on the pre-Enclosure maps), but was diverted to the south in 1821. This divorced the site of the chapel from the hospital buildings.

Little is known about the hospital buildings themselves. They have been located onto the present site by the 1824 Causton map, which shows them as being arranged on a cloister plan. Nineteenth century photographs show the buildings in their early sixteenth century form, built around a small courtyard with a central pumped water supply. The buildings were at least partly timber-framed but were re-fronted post-1821. They were demolished in, or soon after, 1861. There is also a record of a parsonage attached to the hospital, although no further details are known.

A row of cottages was built on the site subsequently, before demolition to provide offices and lorry park.

## **Previous Finds On Site**

The only record of previous archaeology on the site was a note of Roman burials being found in 1856 (Fullbrook-Leggatt 1968, 65). In addition, a considerable amount of work has been carried out on the site of St Margaret's Hospital, lying close-by to the west. This enabled some broad conclusions to be drawn as to likely depth of deposits, but not their degree of survival.

## **Method of Study**

The nature of the existing ground cover, with thick reinforced concrete, and the irregular nature of likely archaeological features precluded the use of remote sensing techniques.

It was therefore decided to excavate a number of trial trenches across the site. The modern surface, make-up and 19th century levels (as perceived by a study of finds) was removed by machine with all subsequent excavation being by hand. A team of five workers was employed for a period of five weeks. The work was funded by Severn-Trent Property Ltd.

The principal trenches (T1 and T2) were designed to sample any activity stretching off the modern London Road frontage, with particular emphasis of the estimated location of St Mary's hospital and possible Roman burials. Three other trenches were excavated in the body of the site to establish how far activity may have extended southwards.

## **The Excavation**

### **Trench 1**

This 28m long trench was designed to cut across the east and south ranges of the medieval hospital, and so assess its likely state of preservation across the rest of the site.

### *Roman*

Fourteen burials were found at the south end of the trench, 24m from the present street frontage, and extending back at least a further 14m. A maximum southern limit can be suggested by the absence of similar finds from Trench 4. It is possible that originally, burials extended further northwards but if so, they were completely removed by medieval and later building activity. There was, however, some suggestion of possible Roman pits and fragmentary building activity at the north end of the site.

ne burials were laid on a variety of alignments on a basic north to south axis, with a suggestion that they may have been grouped around a principal focus off to the west of the excavation - perhaps a mausoleum. Both sexes and all age groups were represented in the burials. dating evidence was poor, but pottery and fragments of brooches suggested a 1st/2nd century date.

An especially interesting group consisted of two burials (100, 108) buried face down, one being a child with evidence of rickets (108), and an adjacent burial (92) that appeared to have been carefully beheaded after death. The skull was found under the knees of the body and still had the upper vertebrae attached but with no sign of slashing that typifies the result of execution. The significance of these is discussed below.

The pattern of nails found in two burials (124) suggested that they had been laid in wooden coffins.

#### *Medieval*

There was little surviving evidence of the medieval hospital within this trench. Building levels appeared to have been completely removed by modern cellarage and clearance. The base of a number of rubbish pits was, however, found which could be dated to the 13th/14th century. These would have been sited at the east end of the south range of the medieval hospital cloister which may therefore be interpreted as being a service (kitchen range).

#### *Post-Medieval*

A substantial layer of ash and debris south of the cloister indicates that there may have been a fire on the site in the mid-late 17th century. A detailed analysis of the finds should be able to establish whether this was as a result of arson during the Siege of Gloucester in 1643 - when the adjacent St Margaret's Hospital is documented as being partially burnt down by the city garrison.

The ash filled a ditch (97) running east to west that probably served as an internal division within the hospital precinct.

#### *Modern*

Some evidence was found for the late 19th century cottages that were built on the site. Subsequently, a large cellar in the centre of the trench, and other substantial foundations and services, had destroyed a considerable part of the archaeology.

#### **Trench 2**

This ran diagonally eastwards from the centre of the site. It was designed to run as near as possible from the estimated site of Roman burials recorded in the 19th century.

Archaeological interest was confined to the west half of the trench.

#### *Roman*

Two burials were found, aligned more on an east to west axis than those found in Trench 1. It is possible that this represents a chronological distinction, although this could not be confirmed by the surviving dating evidence.

#### *Medieval*

No clear evidence was found of any features that may have been associated with the hospital. It is, however, possible that the ditch systems that survived in their latest form

as 17th century features had their origin as boundaries to the medieval hospital precinct.

#### *Post-Medieval*

A sequence of ditches of at least four principal recuts occupied a 5.5m wide band running north to south. These matched a similar sequence of features running east to west across Trench 3. Together they appear to represent a rapid series of recuts of the main boundary ditches surrounding the hospital precinct in the 17th century.

The cause of the rapid succession of digging and backfilling of the ditches is not yet clear. One explanation is that the precinct was partially fortified during the Civil war, first as a Parliamentary outpost and then as a Royalist siege camp.

#### **Trench 3**

This trench lay in the centre of the site.

#### *Post-Medieval*

The earliest features were a match of the succession of ditches recorded in Trench 2. They cut a layer of poorly-worked soil accumulation.

#### **Trenches 4 and 5**

Although no features were recorded within these trenches, it is interesting that the character of the soils differed markedly from that seen in Trench 3. They seem to have been more intensively worked and this may mean that they represent cultivated fields outside the medieval and later precinct.

#### **Trench 6**

This trench was cut at the north end of Trench 1 at the close of the excavation in order to establish the degree of disturbance to the medieval levels in the area that had become apparent from the earlier excavation.

#### *Roman*

A band of crushed gravel and oolite (102), including fragments of tile and charcoal, may represent the line of a trackway leading to the cemetery.

#### *Medieval*

Some evidence was found to suggest the robber trench of the south wall of the north range. The absence of other features seems to confirm the location of the open courtyard of the cloister. Other evidence had been destroyed by substantial modern foundations and by a 19th century well. The latter was, however, capped by a 17th century grave stone.

## Discussion

Although the fieldwork carried out on this site was only designed as a small-scale evaluation, the significance of the results has far exceeded the scale of the operation. They have opened up new discussion as to the way this part of Gloucester developed.

### *The Roman Cemetery*

The excavation has added important new information to an understanding of the nature of the Roman cemetery. The known elements of the latter suggest that the cemetery lay on the east approach road into Roman Gloucester and dated from the late 1st century to the 4th century. In total, burials have been recorded for a known distance of 480m, between 50 London Road and its junction with the Cheltenham Road. A broad sequence of development has been suggested by the presence of cremation burials towards the east end, with parallels from the Kingsholm cemetery suggesting that the origin of the cemetery was towards that end, with the inhumation cemetery extending closer towards the city through time as the settled area of the latter contracted.

The results of the 1993 St Mary's excavation, together with those from the burials recorded from the 1990 excavation and 1991/2 watching brief on St Margaret's reinforces the impression that there may not have been an even distribution of burials throughout the zone of the cemetery. Other areas of local high density are probably also reflected in the reported find of 110 cremation urns from the land of Mr Niblett in 1870.

One possibility is that the inhumation burials may have been grouped around a series of mausolea stretching alongside the Roman Road, with two possible mausolea being known from the St Margaret's Hospital. Although no direct evidence of such a mausolea was found on the St Mary's site, the alignment of burials in Trench 1 clearly suggested a focus lying to the west with finds of Roman building materials also pointing to an adjacent stone building. The burials found in 1993 are further to the south than were expected - other finds having been recorded with a band c25m from the present London Road frontage. It is possible that they were set beside a minor road - possibly even the trackway recorded in Trench 6.

No evidence of cremations was found on the site.

### *Saxo-Norman development*

A possible Late Saxon or early Norman suburban development in the area was suggested by the evidence of a timber building on the St Margaret's site. It may be that this included a religious site that was the successor of the Roman cemetery. This may, in its turn, have provided the impetus for the founding of the medieval hospitals. A cursory examination of the pottery from the 1993 excavation has identified 12th century wares, with the possibility that there may also be material dating back to the 11th century.

### *Medieval Hospital*

The evidence of 19th century maps has placed the main cloister block of the 12th century and later hospital entirely within the proposed development area. The only surviving record is of a simple block plan of 1824 and a number of photographs which show the buildings after their rebuilding in the early 16th century.

Enough evidence was found to confirm the location of this building, with the suggestion that the south range may have contained the kitchen area. No evidence was found of

any surrounding ancillary buildings. The evidence of soil accumulations from Trench 3 suggests that the land within the precinct boundary on this side may have consisted of orchards.

#### *17th century Activity*

The presence of substantial ditch systems in Trenches 2 and 3, with their fills dating to the 17th century was unexpected. In plan, they are clearly related to the medieval hospital and probably originally served as the precinct boundary. A subsidiary ditch bisected this area in Trench 1.

The rapid recutting of the ditches in the 17th century and the scale of the works of this period - 1.6m deep and 3m wide suggest a purpose more than a simple boundary feature. Hence it has been suggested that the medieval ditches were completely redug to form hurried defences around the hospital, for use in the Civil War. The site commands the road down into the city and may originally have served as an outwork for the city (Parliamentary) defences. If so, it would have been abandoned in August 1643 at the start of the siege and may then have been refortified as part of the Royalist encampments of the area. Other slight evidence of, equally undocumented, works have been recently found on Horton Road. The royalists certainly had a camp around St Margaret's Hospital and this was burned by the city during the siege. A similar occurrence around St Mary's may account for the spreads of ash on the site. Judgment on this must, however be reserved until the detailed work on the finds is completed.

## Recommendations for future action

The evaluation has been successful in establishing the main points set by the desk-Top Assessment, namely:

- 1) Investigation of the likelihood of a Roman cemetery on the site - *confirmed*.
- 2) Establish an accurate location of the medieval cloister block and assess its degree of preservation - *site confirmed although in a poor state of preservation*.
- 3) Investigate the presence of ancillary buildings - *no evidence found with a suggestion that the land formed part of an otherwise undeveloped orchard*
- 4) Establish the depth of the archaeological sequence - *an average depth of 1m*

### *A Design Brief to mitigate damage to the surviving archaeology*

Three areas of principal archaeological interest have been defined

- 1) West Roman burial area  
linked to:
- 2) Medieval hospital

and

- 3) East Roman burial area

### Areas 1 and 2

Any future disturbance, including services, should be kept to a minimum and should only be carried out under close archaeological monitoring. Services should attempt to follow existing runs or be contained within existing areas of disturbance. These include the large areas of modern cellars and also the line of the archaeological trial trenches (where all archaeological features have been removed).

*Area 1* has a particular importance due to the statutory obligation to avoid known cemeteries. The burials are also well-preserved. It was noticeable that disintegration of the bones was accelerated adjacent to existing services and this should be taken into account when planning future services. The burials also seem to form part of a group, related to an, as yet, unidentified focus and therefore should be kept as intact as possible to allow for future study.

*Area 2* has unfortunately already been subjected to some of the worst disturbance identified on the site. Most of the evidence of the medieval hospital has already been destroyed within the area of the earlier Severn-Trent office block, with the archaeological potential largely been destroyed. This does, however, place a premium on what remains. The most significant deposits that survive are probably to the west of the site (beneath the present entrance way) although services will also have produced damage here.

### Area 3

The archaeological potential of this area has already been disturbed. This allows a greater flexibility of treatment than might otherwise be suggested. Nevertheless, disturbance should be kept to minimum horizontal areas, and as far as possible within the top 0.80m of the present site levels. A raising of the existing ground levels, using suspended floors etc., would help minimise impact on the archaeology.

There appears to be a lesser density of burials within this area, and preservation is poorer than in Area 1. The only way to establish the precise areas of intact burials would be to excavate them - which would defeat the purpose of trying to preserve the remains. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that some potential loss through piling would be an acceptable compromise, although extensive horizontal disturbance should be avoided.

Disturbance should be concentrated along the line of the 17th century ditches, under archaeological monitoring. The reasoning behind this is that these features have already been sampled and sufficient will remain outside the area of potential disturbance to protect the major part of the feature for the future.

The plan under submission (ref.25161/07/JMG) has been positively directed to satisfy these criteria, based on the provisional interpretation of the site provided in the desk-top assessment and in informal discussions regarding the evaluation excavation. The plan incorporates features to minimise encroachment into Areas 1 and 2 and the use of suspended floors in Area 3. Consultation will, however, need to be continued during the course of preparing detailed foundation plans and designing service layouts. Any change in the layout of proposed buildings on the site will, of course, require consultation.

The outcome of these consultations will determine whether further small-scale excavation is necessary along the line of especially-sensitive service lines, or in Area 3, dependent on the final degree of ground disturbance that is accepted as being inevitable.

### Costing

The discovery of an unexpected number of human remains, and the cost of commissioning specialist reports on them, has meant that the existing budget of £6,700 for the evaluation will all need to be drawn upon to complete that stage of the work

The cost implication of any further archaeological works can clearly not be finally settled until the detail of the design (including drainage) is finalised. The efforts that have been made to date have been to minimise the need for excavation but the requirement to ensure adequate monitoring of the groundworks has been emphasised. A contingency to excavate small areas within Area 3 and along the line of some services has also been highlighted.

At this stage, it is recommended that an estimate of £4250 be put into the construction budget to be drawn upon if necessary. This accounts for the high cost of processing the human remains found on the site, and also a subsidy for the publication of the report in *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*.

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MA 30/07/93

London Road

AREA 2

Trench 8

AREA 3  
(Burials)

Garage

Trench 2

Trench 1

line of 17th c. ditches

Trench 3

AREA 1  
(Burials)

Trench 5

Trench 4

0 30m

