

# 75, SEA MILLS LANE, SEA MILLS, BRISTOL.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRIAL EXCAVATION PROJECT

**Report: BSMR 22202**



On behalf of  
**Mrs D Britton**

**Andrew C. Young BA AIFA**  
**Avon Archaeological Unit**

**Bristol: August 2005**

No. 75 Sea Mills Lane, Sea Mills, Bristol.

Site Specific Archaeological Evaluation

*Report BSMR 22202*

*BRSMG 2005/69*

for  
Mrs D. Britton

Andrew C. Young BA AIFA  
**Avon Archaeological Unit**  
Bristol. August 2005



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Report Number BSMR 22202

Avon Archaeological Unit

August 2005

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## Summary

A trial excavation, involving three archaeological trenches, was undertaken within the footprint of a site planned for redevelopment at 75 Sea Mills Lane, Sea Mills, Bristol (NGR ST 5520 7594). The project was commissioned and funded by the landowner, Mrs D Britton, and undertaken in accordance with a Scheme of Work submitted to and approved by the Archaeological Officer for Bristol City Council. The trenches were located to provide a representative sample of the potential subterranean deposits present on the site and specifically to determine if significant archaeology associated with the nationally important Roman settlement of Sea Mills, Roman *Abone*, were preserved as buried deposits, features or artefacts. The trenches were located and opened in accordance with a layout defined in a Brief supplied by the City Archaeological Officer and included one trench that was sited to evaluate the footprint of a house that stood on the site until a recent fire. The trenches were aligned parallel and opened down the natural slope of the site in a pattern designed to establish if a Roman road and associated human burials and negative features located on the adjacent property, 79 Sea Mills Lane, continued into the Study Area.

Two of the trenches revealed a series of substantial cut soil features interpreted as large postholes and associated ditches, all of which were sealed by approximately 250 mm of relatively clean subsoil. The third trench revealed a modern terraced cutting formed to construct a house that stood on the site until recently. All the archaeological features produced significant amounts of Roman pottery in addition to quantities of animal bone and a handful of iron and glass finds. The Roman features are considered to include elements of one or more earthfast timber structures that are dated by pottery to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and therefore associated with the early Roman military activity at Sea Mills. Specialist assessment of non-ceramic finds indicates significant potential for the preservation of charred plant and faunal remains from the same period.

On the basis of the evidence located in the trial trenches it is concluded that significant buried archaeological features and deposits of early Roman date are preserved on the site and that further archaeological features and deposits of similar date and regional importance are likely to be preserved elsewhere on the site, outside the footprint of the building that was recently destroyed by fire. As the great majority of the existing archaeological evidence for Roman military activity at Sea Mills is residual and from later Roman contexts the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman features located at No. 75 are therefore of considerable archaeological importance and have the potential to significantly improve our understanding of the early Roman settlement at Sea Mills.

It is concluded that the archaeological potential of the site is moderate to high, outside the footprint of the building that was destroyed by fire, where the potential is considered to be very low.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 It is proposed to redevelop a plot of land located off the south side of Sea Mills Lane, Sea Mills, Bristol at NGR ST 5520 7594 for housing (**Figures 1 and 2**). The site comprises approximately 1600 square metres of somewhat overgrown ground incorporating the footprint of a former house plot, destroyed by fire, and associated garden with access drive off Sea Mills Lane.

1.2 Sea Mills is located on the East bank of the River Avon, between Sneyd Park and Shirehampton, on either side of the lower valley of the River Trym. Modern Sea Mills is a residential area of detached and semi-detached housing constructed in the 1920's and 1930's, with a settlement of c. 1945 *prefabs* adjacent to the 19<sup>th</sup> century railway station.

1.3 The Evaluation was requested by Bristol City Council and further to the results of a preliminary desk based archaeological assessment (Etheridge, 2004), undertaken by Avon Archaeological Unit on behalf of Mrs D. Britton, the present owner.

1.4 Three archaeological trenches (**Figure 3**, Trenches 1 - 3) were opened in accordance with a Scheme of Work prepared by Avon Archaeological Unit and approved by Bristol City Council. The principal objective of the evaluation was to establish if significant archaeological remains of Roman date, associated with the Roman military and later urbanised settlement of *Abone*, were preserved as buried features, deposits or finds. The trenches were opened using a JCB excavator on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 2005 under direct archaeological supervision and backfilled upon the completion of the fieldwork.

1.5 The archaeological archive gathered during the project (Bristol Sites & Monuments Record 22202) will be temporarily stored at the offices of Avon Archaeological Unit, Bristol, and ultimately deposited with Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery for long term curation and storage under Museum Accession Number BRSMG 2005/69.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Three archaeological trenches were opened on the site (**Figure 3**) using a JCB excavator equipped with a toothless grading bucket. Each trench was cleaned and investigated by hand and recorded in Mss notes, photographically and using the standard archaeological context-based recording procedures of Avon Archaeological Unit, in accordance with the Scheme of Work (Young, 2004) submitted to and approved by Bristol City Council.

### 3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

An Archaeological Desk Based Assessment (Etheridge 2004) of the site produced the following results.

The Study Area is located on the south side of the lower valley of the River Trym, a large stream which joins the River Avon at a tidal inlet. The Trym was formerly navigable to small craft at high tide for some distance. The Study Area is situated just above the flood plain of the Trym, as the land rises steeply to the South and West towards Sneyd Park and the Downs.

The Study Area comprises in one part a surfaced drive flanked on either side by hedges, providing access to the remainder of the property located off Sea Mills Lane. The remainder is currently a flattened area of former house plot, with a mature and overgrown garden including several trees. There are no standing structures within the Study Area at present, with the exception of one collapsing wooden shed in the western corner of the garden. Structures marked at this location on the most recent Ordnance Survey maps are no longer extant, and little trace of them could be observed on the ground. These former structures, which had occupied the location since the 1920's, appear to have consisted of a detached house and garage, formerly *The Warren*, No.75 Sea Mills Lane. The present owner has informed the writer that the house was destroyed by fire in 2003, and the ruin was subsequently demolished.

Maps of Westbury-on-Trym Parish from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century indicate that by the later 18<sup>th</sup> century the Study Area was part of a field in an enclosed rural landscape. The Study Area was adjacent to a house, later *Riverside House*, No.79 Sea Mills Lane. Nearby, an early 18<sup>th</sup> century attempt to establish a dock at Sea Mills had failed and by 1840 the dock was abandoned and ruinous. The former broad lane to the dock had been reduced to a cart track. An OS Map of 1881 shows the arrival of the railway with the present Sea Mills station, but the area remained essentially rural until c. 1930.

By 1931 the modern Portway (A4) had been constructed between Bristol and Avonmouth. Several large housing estates had been constructed on either side of the Trym, above the flood plain. The present Study Area and former house had been laid out and constructed c. 1927. Various additions and extensions were added to the house between c. 1936 and 1990.

An aerial photograph taken of Sea Mills in 1947, shows the Study Area as it appears on OS Maps of 1949 and 1952. At this time little agricultural land remained in the area, the majority had been developed for housing, and the remainder had been converted to sports and recreation use. A network of former drainage ditches and channels, relating to 18<sup>th</sup> century exploitation of the Trym, can also be observed to cross the flood plain. Nothing of archaeological significance was observed within the Study Area.

Documentary evidence indicates that in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Roman remains were observed, probably during the construction of the old docks. Subsequent finds of objects and sites continued in the vicinity of Sea Mills through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rescue excavations by trained archaeologists began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued at various locations in Sea Mills well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is now widely agreed that the Roman activity at Sea Mills represents the site of the former Roman settlement of *Abone*. Excavation has shown

that this settlement began as a 1<sup>st</sup> century AD legionary station, expanding into a small town by the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, before abandonment in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During the 1960's, rescue excavation in advance of the construction of nearby Abon House recorded a sequence of occupation from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century the settlement consisted of stone built town houses fronting a cobbled street or road. The alignment of that road would project its course north eastward through the garden of No. 79 and the house and garden of No. 75. In 2001 rescue excavations in the garden of No. 79 revealed the course of the road continuing towards adjacent No. 75. No structures dating to the Roman period were observed, but two 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century cremations burials were excavated, and the remains of an undated inhumation burial were observed.

Two enthusiastic schoolboy volunteers in the 1960's reported seeing Roman building remains at both the Study Area and at No.32 Branscombe Road, c. 50 m from the Study Area.

On the basis of the evidence gathered during the Desktop study the general archaeological potential of the site was considered to be high, with buried archaeological remains of Roman origin and including a Roman trackway or road possibly preserved.

## 4 DESCRIPTION OF THE EVALUATION TRENCHES

### 4.1 Trench 1 (Figures 3 and 5; Plates 1, 2, 4 and 6) Dimensions 11.9 m x 1.7 m x up to 1.45 m deep

#### General

Trench 1 was aligned approximately Northwest to Southeast and located close to the southern end of the building destroyed by fire. The cutting revealed three cut archaeological soil features c. 450 mm below the modern ground surface, each of which was sealed by subsoil deposits and cut into undisturbed natural substrata. A short arm was added to the trench at the southeastern end to enable one of the archaeological features to be investigated.

Overall the cutting (**Plate 6**) revealed a relatively straightforward sequence of deposits comprising topsoil overlying subsoil that in turn sealed natural clay and weathered sandstone substrata. This sequence was interrupted at three places in the trench by cut archaeological soil features (**Figure 5**, Cuts 105, 107 and 109), which were cut into natural substrata and sealed by subsoil deposits. The sequence of archaeological and natural features and deposits recorded in the trench were as follows:

#### Recorded Contexts

##### *Context 100*

A layer of humic dark brown loam topsoil up to 230 mm thick. The layer contained common roots plus patches of modern clinker and fire debris.

##### *Context 101*

A layer of hard, dry and friable light reddish-brown silt clay subsoil up to 300 mm thick containing inclusions of sparse small stones and rare pottery sherds.

##### *Context 102*

A lens of dark reddish to greyish-brown sandy clay up to 80 mm thick revealed in the southwest facing trench section. The deposit contained inclusions of sparse charcoal fragments and small sandstone rubble and stones and one sherd of pottery and was located c. 1.2 m to the northeast of, and directly opposite, Feature 105 (below). The deposit was not further exposed or excavated archaeologically but appeared to represent the fill of a cut (103) soil feature.

##### *Context 103*

Possible cut soil feature. See context 102 above.

##### *Context 104*

Upper fill of Cut 105 up to 370 mm deep comprising friable stiff silt clay with sparse small stones and a few larger lumps of sandstone rubble.

##### *Context 105*

Subcircular cut soil feature 1.2 m x 1.1 m in plan and up to 530 mm deep with steep sides and a flat base cut into the natural substratum. Filled by two deposits 104 (above) and 113 (below) and exposing bedrock (111) in the base of the cut.

*Context 106*

Upper fill of Cut 107 up to 200 mm deep comprising stiff to hard grey brown silt clay with sparse small stones.

*Context 107*

Linear cut soil feature up to 650 mm wide and 700 mm deep aligned NE to SW. Filled by a sequence of three stony soil deposits (106, 114 and 115) and extending beyond the limits of the trench.

*Context 108*

Upper fill of Cut 109 up to 430 mm deep comprising friable dark brown clay silt with sparse small stones and common charcoal inclusions.

*Context 109*

Subcircular cut soil feature up to 1.7 m x 850 mm in plan with an offset socket up to 760 mm deep. The feature was cut into the natural substratum with steep to vertical sides and a flat base and filled by two deposits 108 (above) and 116 (below).

*Context 110*

Stiff natural clay substratum.

*Context 111*

Natural substratum comprising mixed red marl and heavily weathered blocks of bedded pale sandstone.

*Context 112*

Lower subsoil layer comprising light yellowish to reddish brown friable silt clay cut by all archaeological features and overlying Deposits 111 and 112.

*Context 113*

Primary fill of Cut 105 up to 240 mm thick and comprising friable dark reddish-brown silt clay with moderate to common charcoal inclusions. Texturally similar to Fill 108 (above).

*Context 114*

Intermediate fill of Cut 107 up to 290 mm thick and comprising friable to stiff dark brown silt clay with common charcoal inclusions.

*Context 115*

Primary fill of Cut 107 up to 250 mm thick and comprising firm reddish-brown clay with sparse charcoal inclusions and a few larger stones in the very base.

*Context 116*

Primary fill of Cut 109 up to 360 mm thick. Texturally similar to Fill 108 (above) but with fewer inclusions of charcoal and weathered sandstone and few finds.

## **Discussion**

Three substantial cut soil features were revealed in the trench, all of which were sealed by a layer of upper subsoil (101) and cut into a thin lower subsoil (112) and underlying natural substrata. Each of the features yielded stratified and sealed Roman pottery (see Appendix 1) and other finds although no associated soil layers were located and it is therefore possible that the features have been truncated to an unknown extent.

Feature 107 was linear and clearly extended beyond the confines of the trench. The vertical sides and narrow profile of the cut suggest that it may represent a structural feature as opposed to a standard ditch or gully.

Feature 105 contained finds including pottery and animal bone although the quantities present were not sufficient to suggest it was dug merely for rubbish disposal. The feature appeared to be structural, possible a pit for an earthfast timber.

Feature 109 mainly consisted of a deep central socket with vertical sides. The profile of the cut strongly suggests a structural purpose, most likely for a large earthfast timber.

### **4.2 Trench 2** (Figures 3 and 6; Plate 3) Dimensions 10.3 m x 1.7 m x up to 1 m deep

#### **General**

Trench 2 was aligned approximately Northwest to Southeast and located across the footprint of the house that occupied the site until destroyed by fire. A short arm was added to the trench at the southeastern end to clarify a cut feature.

Overall the cutting (**Plate 3**) revealed a simple sequence of deposits comprising mixed thin topsoil overlying modern made ground and natural clay and weathered sandstone substrata. The sequence of features and deposits recorded in the trench were as follows:

#### **Recorded Contexts**

##### *Context 200*

A thin layer of highly mixed humic dark brown loam topsoil up to 150 mm thick. The layer contained common roots plus modern clinker, rubble and brick debris.

##### *Context 201*

A thick deposit up to 800 mm deep of highly mixed and redeposited soil and rubble incorporating concrete and brick fragments plus plastic and lenses of redeposited natural clay and substrata.

##### *Context 202*

Natural substratum comprising mixed red marl and heavily weathered blocks of bedded pale sandstone.

##### *Context 203*

Rock-cut feature located close to the southeastern end of the trench and extending beyond the confines of the trench. Filled by Deposit 201.

## **Discussion**

The majority of the cutting revealed a thick deposit of highly mixed modern fill overlying undisturbed natural substrata. The fill lay within a rock-cut terrace (203) that appeared to conform to the approximate footprint of the house that was destroyed by fire and subsequently demolished. No significant archaeological features or finds were located.

### **4.3 Trench 3** (Figures 3 and 6; Plates 5) Dimensions 12.7 m x 1.8 m x up to 800 mm deep

#### **General**

Trench 3 was aligned approximately Northwest to Southeast and located adjacent to the boundary with No 79a Sea Mills Lane and in a position where the course of the Roman trackway located on the 79a property was expected to continue.

Overall the cutting (**Plate 5**) revealed a straightforward sequence of deposits comprising topsoil overlying subsoil that in turn sealed natural clay and weathered sandstone substrata. This sequence was interrupted at northwestern end of the trench by a cut archaeological soil feature (**Figure 6**, Cut 304), which was cut into natural substrata and sealed by subsoil. The sequence of archaeological and natural features and deposits recorded in the trench were as follows:

#### **Recorded Contexts**

##### *Context 301*

A layer of humic dark brown loam topsoil up to 320 mm thick. The layer contained common roots plus occasional patches of modern clinker and small rubble.

##### *Context 302*

A layer of hard, dry and friable light reddish-brown silt clay subsoil up to 500 mm thick containing inclusions of sparse small stones and a handful of unstratified pottery sherds.

##### *Context 303*

Interbedded deposit of weathered sandstone bedrock and stiff red marl. Undisturbed natural substrata.

##### *Context 304*

Linear cut soil feature up to 1.2 m wide and 550 mm deep aligned NE to SW. Filled by a sequence of two stony soil deposits (305 and 309) and extending beyond the limits of the trench.

##### *Context 305*

Upper fill of Cut 304 up to 280 mm deep comprising friable and hard dark brown clay silt with common charcoal inclusions and a concentration of Roman pottery and small stones that in the upper surface of the deposit.

##### *Context 306*

Natural substrata.

*Context 307*

Possible cut soil feature confirmed as natural.

*Context 308*

Same as 302.

*Context 309*

Primary fill of Cut 304 up to 290 mm deep comprising friable and hard dark brown clay silt with sparse to moderate charcoal inclusions and small sandstone stones.

**Discussion**

A single cut soil feature (304) was revealed at the northwestern end of the trench that was sealed by a layer of subsoil (302) and cut into the underlying natural substrata. The feature was aligned parallel to the Roman ditch (107) identified in Trench 1 and also yielded an assemblage of stratified and sealed Roman pottery (see Appendix 1). The feature appeared to represent a shallow ditch or boundary gully that extended beyond the confines of the trench.

**5 SUMMARY OF FINDS**

**5.1 Pottery**

An assemblage of 443 pottery sherds were recovered from the trenches, the great majority from sealed cut soil features in Trenches 1 and 3. The great majority of the collection appeared to be of Roman origin and was therefore submitted to Dr Jane Timby for specialist assessment (see Appendix 1 below).

**5.2 Animal Bone**

A small collection of animal bone was recovered from deposits excavated in Trenches 1 and 3. In view of the ceramic dating for these deposits the assemblage was submitted to Lorraine Higby for specialist assessment (see Appendix 2). The collection indicates the presence of a number of standard domesticated species most likely representing food residues, plus fish and small mammal bones.

**5.3 Environmental Remains**

A single bulk environmental sample was taken from Deposit 108 in Trench 1. In view of the ceramic dating for this deposit the sample was submitted to Kath Hunter for specialist assessment (see Appendix 3). Identified charred plant remains included arable crops such as Barley and Wheat, food crops such as legumes and a range of wild and cultivar weed types.

**5.4 Other Finds**

A small number of structural iron nails were recovered from Deposit 104. In addition a single fragment of blue vessel glass of probable early Roman type was also recovered from Deposit 104 in Trench 1. These finds were not submitted for specialist assessment.

## 6. Summary and General Conclusions

6.1 Three archaeological evaluation trenches (Trenches 1- 3) were opened at specified locations on the site and in accordance a project brief issued by the City Archaeological Officer for Bristol City Council. The trenches were sited to test the potential archaeological impact of future redevelopment of the site and in particular to determine if significant archaeological deposits of Roman date were preserved as subterranean features or deposits.

6.2 Significant archaeological features were located in Trenches 1 and 3 that were preserved at relatively shallow depth and sealed by a deposit of fairly sterile subsoil. The principal features consisted of a group of four cut soil features representing a pair of parallel ditches and two substantial pits. The pits were both located in Trench 1 and are interpreted to represent structural features that were originally dug to hold substantial earthfast timbers. The pottery recovered from the soils filling these features is exclusively of 1<sup>st</sup> century AD Roman date and includes some pre-Flavian (before AD 69) types with no discernible later Roman material present. It is therefore highly likely that the structural features located in the trenches are associated with the early Roman military station at Sea Mills, the previous evidence for which mainly consists of early Roman artefacts recovered from later Roman contexts.

6.3 Evidence for the Claudian and later 1<sup>st</sup> century AD Roman military stations in the West is surprisingly rare and at Sea Mills is mainly indicated by military equipment and Claudio-Neronian coins recovered from later Roman contexts. Moreover, the features located in the trial trenches represents one of the first instances where structural features dating from the Roman military period have been identified with any certainty at Sea Mills. In view of this the archaeology that has been located is considered to be of regional importance with the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of the chronology and character of the early Roman military station known to have been established at Sea Mills some time after AD 43.

6.4 On the basis of the evidence gathered during the evaluation it is concluded that the part of the site that was previously occupied by the footprint of the former house, and the area evaluated by Trench 2, has very low archaeological potential. Conversely the remainder of the site, incorporating the areas evaluated by Trenches 1 and 3, has moderate to high archaeological potential (**Figure 4 – Areas of Archaeological Potential**). Accordingly, if redevelopment of the site proceeds some further archaeological mitigation, the precise nature of which would be specified by the City Archaeologist, is likely to be necessary in the area of moderate to high potential in advance of development to properly identify and record significant Roman deposits and features preserved therein.

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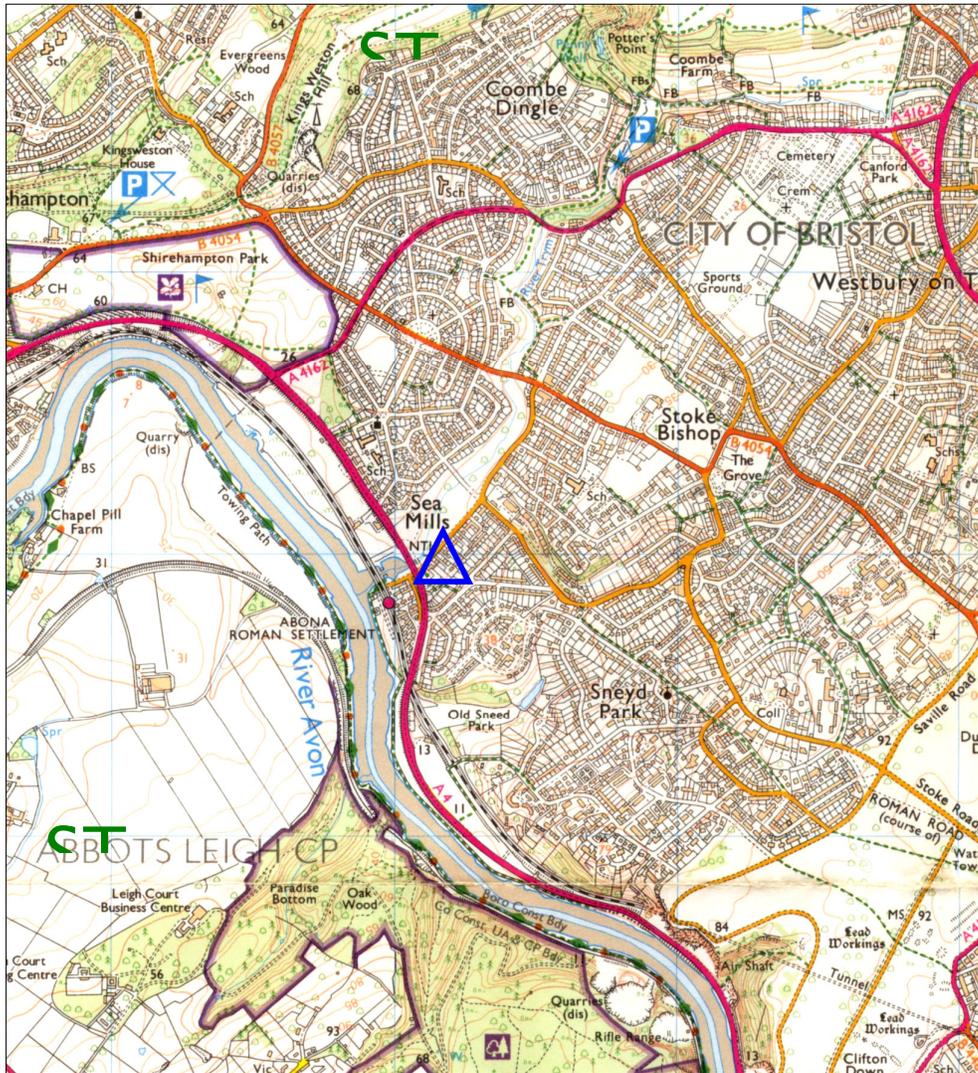
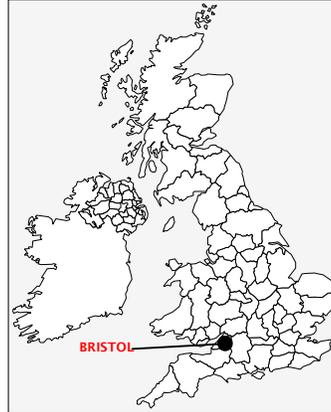
Figure 1

75 Sea Mills Lane, Sea Mills, Bristol

Site Location



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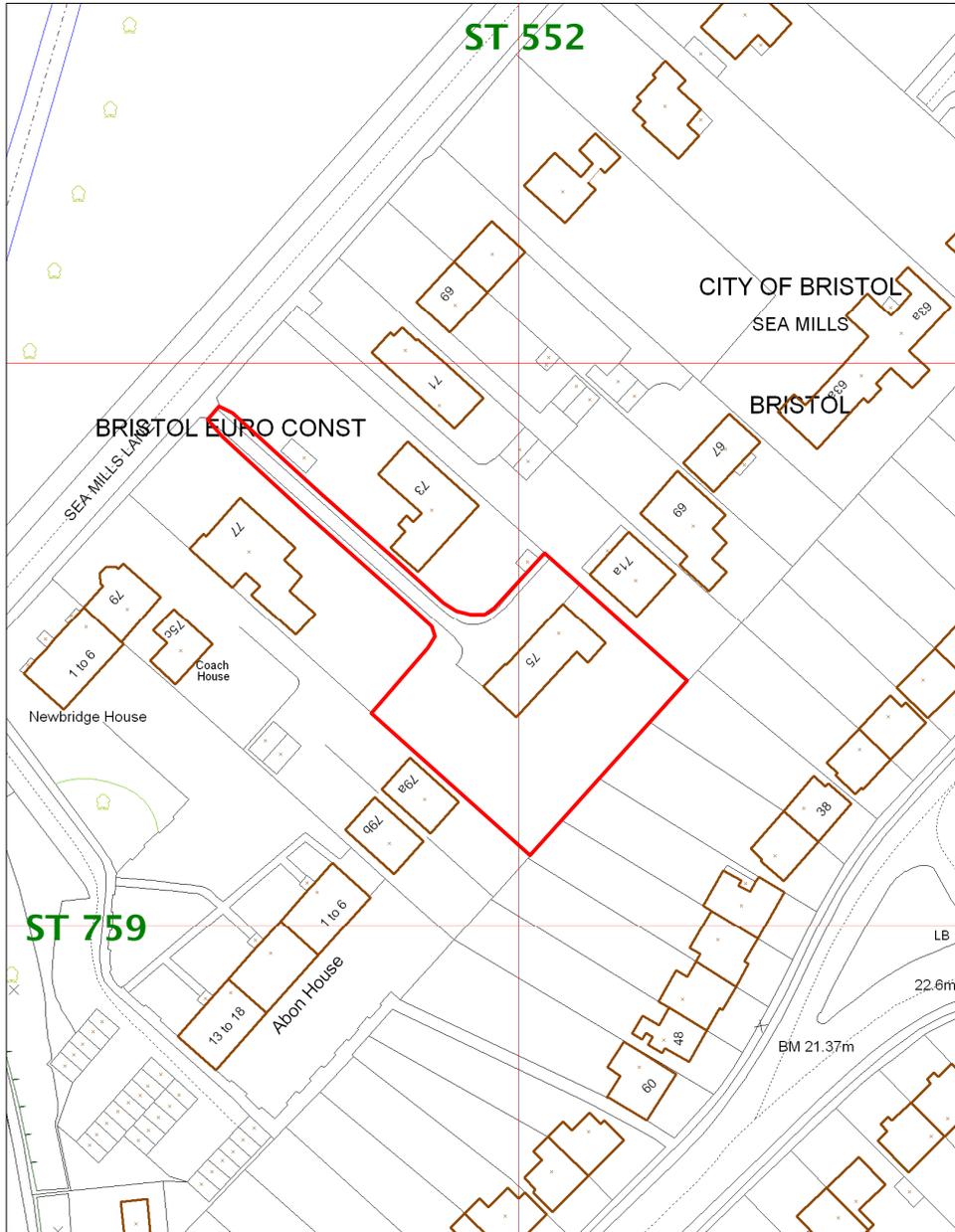
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**Figure 2**

**Boundary of the Study Area (outlined in red)**

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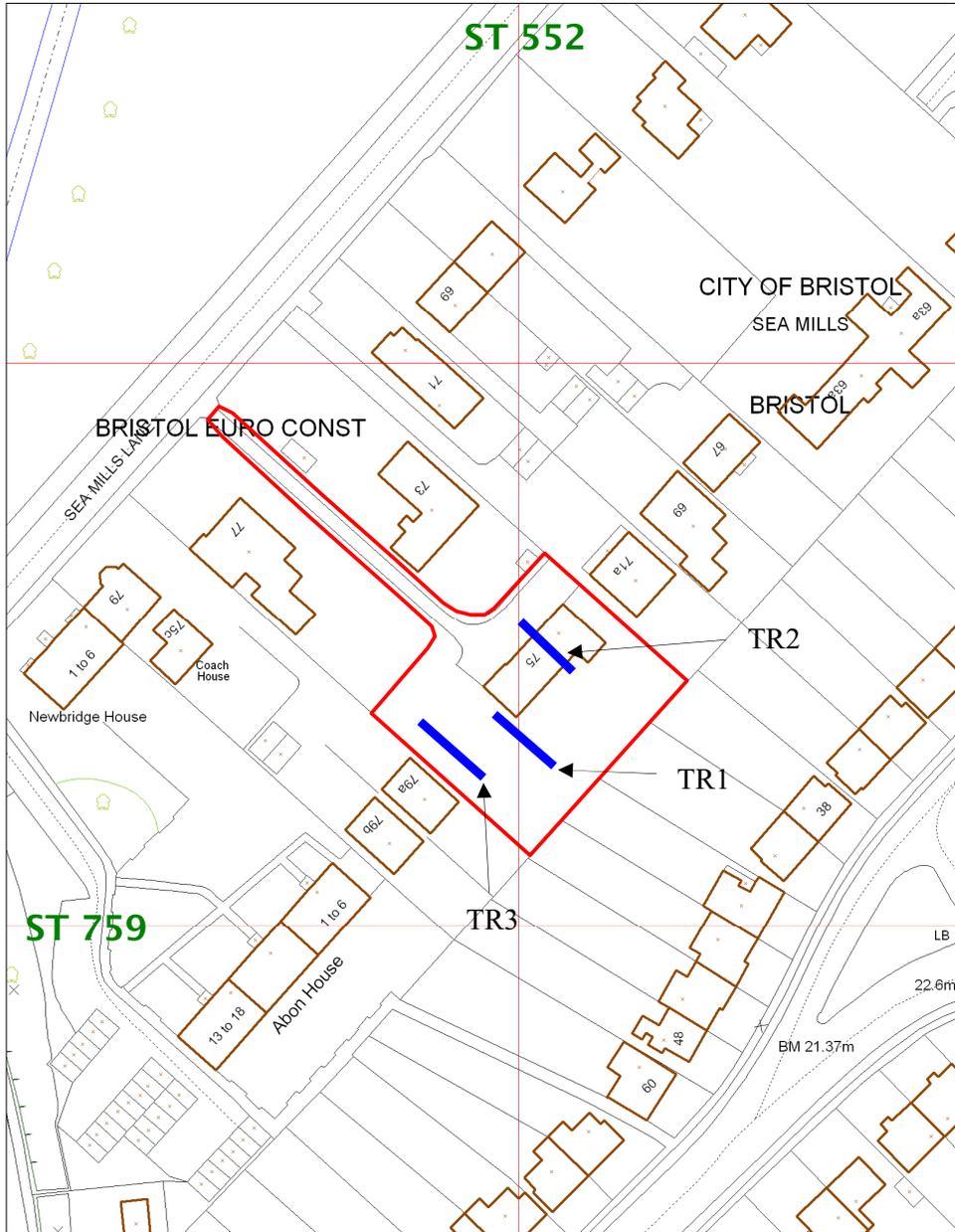
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**Figure 3**

**Location of the Trial Trenches (shown in blue)**

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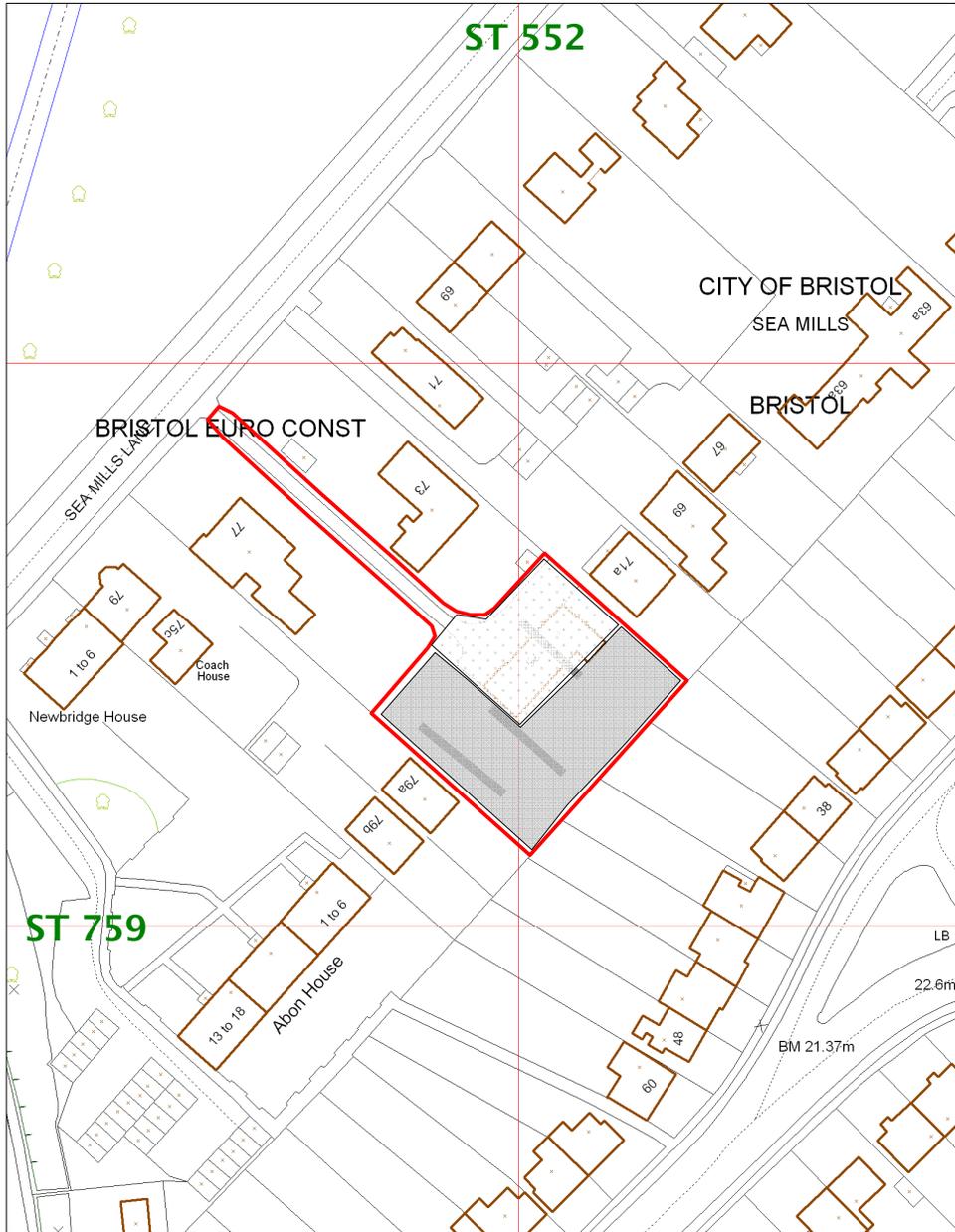
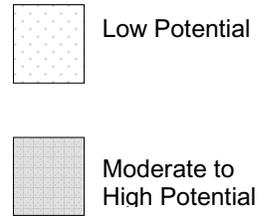
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**Figure 4**

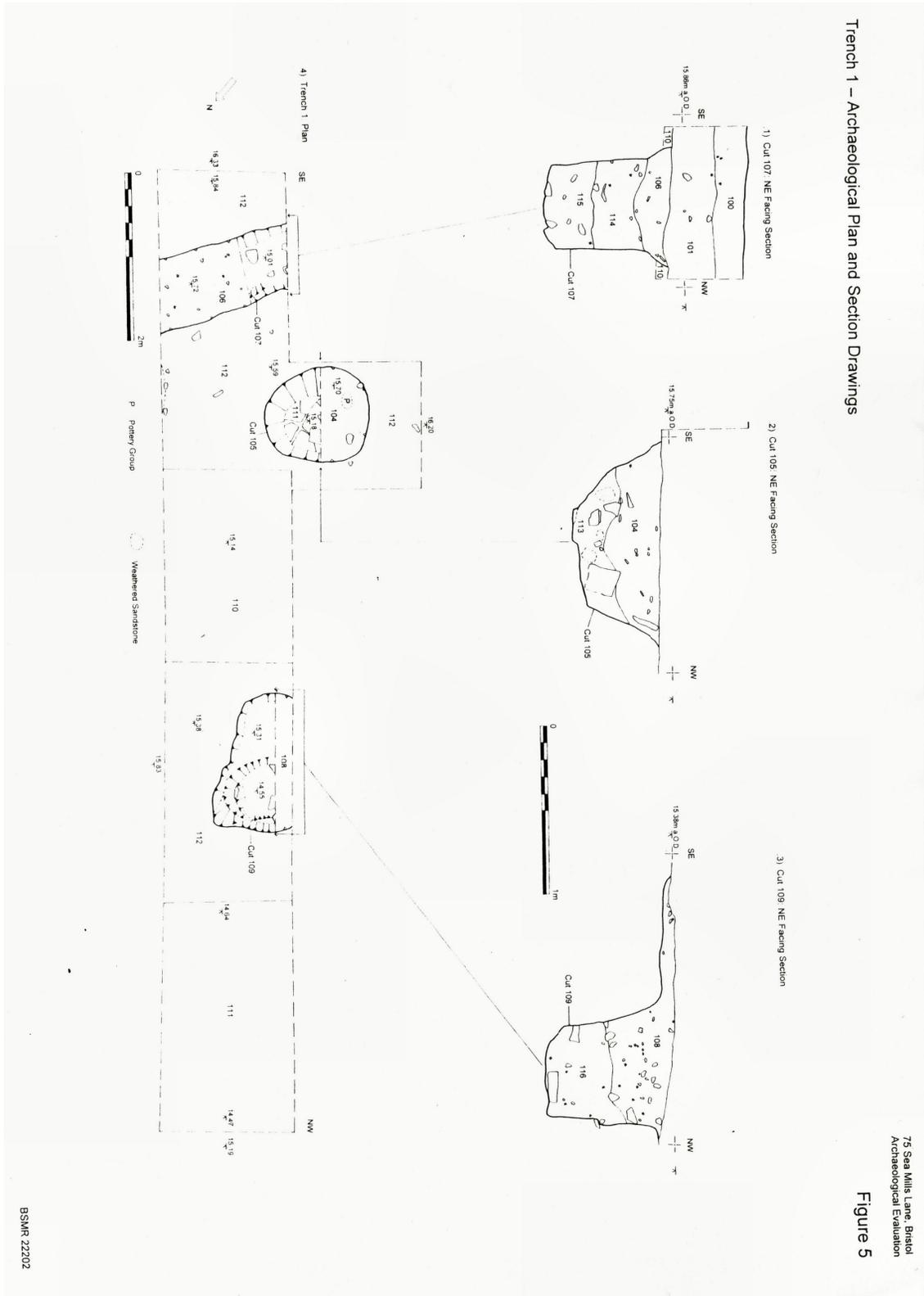
**Areas of Archaeological Potential**

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For: Avon Archaeological Services  
Site: 75, Sea Mills Lane, Sea Mills  
Site code: BSMR 22202  
Status: assessment  
Author: Jane Timby  
Date: August 2005

## POTTERY ASSESSMENT

### Introduction

The archaeological work at 75 Sea Mills Lane resulted in the recovery of 443 sherds of pottery weighing c 3.3 kg exclusively dating to the early Roman period. In addition a few pieces of ceramic building material (CBM) and fired clay/daub are present.

Pottery was recovered from 14 recorded contexts including unstratified groups. The sherds are in a fairly fragmented state with an overall average sherd weight of just 7.5 g.

For the purposes of the assessment the assemblage was scanned to determine the form and fabrics and the likely date of the pieces. These were quantified by sherd count and weight for each context. The resulting data is summarised in Table 1.

### Roman

The complete assemblage dates to the early Roman period, in particular the later 1st century with a few pre-Flavian sherds. The reoccurrence of the same wares and possibly the same vessels throughout several contexts would argue that the deposit comes from a single phase of occupation. The apparent well-broken condition of the pottery is thus curious as it would suggest material subjected to ongoing disturbance. It may all derive from a single midden deposit in situ or may represent make-up layers for subsequent building or surfaces derived from a single deposit.

Continental imports include 23 sherds of South Gaulish samian including examples of a Ritterling 9 cup (pre-Flavian), and dishes/ bowls Dragendorff 15/17 and 29. A single sherd of terra nigra platter could be of pre or immediate post-Flavian date and a few sherds of fine whiteware flagon are probably also from an imported Gaulish vessel. Other imports include several sherds of Dressel 20 olive oil amphora, some burnt, and a Haltern 70, both types from Southern Spain.

The accompanying pottery includes various local grey and oxidised wares, native handmade wares, in particular a grog-tempered ware and a limestone-tempered, vesicular ware, Severn

Valley ware and Savernake ware. Of note are three sherds from a jar base with a large hole through the centre. Amongst the other wares is a ring-necked flagon from (116) of probably Flavian date and a distinctive West Country lid-seated jar (108).

The complete absence of any later material and the obvious homogeneity of the group is also unusual particularly when nearby excavations at Abon House and Sea Mills Lane (Ellis 1987) and Nazareth House (Bennett 1985) have produced assemblages of mixed Roman and post-Roman date albeit with an earlier emphasis.

The quantity of samian is notable, 5% by sherd count, and this combined with the other imports argues for a military source for the material recovered here.

#### Potential and further work

The assemblage is of considerable interest in terms of the location. Although quite a bit of excavation has been undertaken in Sea Mills it has been very piecemeal and poorly published. Much of the pottery recovered has been in very mixed condition often with post-Roman finds intermixed. The early date of the group must have some significance in terms of the inferred military origin of the site, which developed in to a small settlement in the mid-later Roman periods.

As a group the assemblage does not merit detailed publication but could be summarised if publication is envisaged.

#### References

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