

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION ON ALFRETON ROAD, LITTLE CHESTER, DERBY

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SUMMARY

An archaeological evaluation, undertaken in advance of housing development at the former Bristol Street Motors on Alfreton Rd, Little Chester, detected evidence for the Roman period extramural settlement relating to the adjacent fort. A mid first century ditch, together with second century features containing charcoal and daub, probably deriving from the destruction of timber structures, were recorded and probably relate specifically to the rear of plots fronting on to the north side of the Old Chester Road.

INTRODUCTION

In April 2007, University of Leicester Archaeological Services, on behalf of George Wimpey Ltd, undertook an archaeological evaluation on a hectare of land at the former Bristol Street Motors, Alfreton Road, Little Chester, approximately 1km north of Derby city centre (SK 356376) (Figs 1 and 2). This work was carried out in advance of the proposed construction of residential dwellings. The site lies on alluvial deposits at a height of c.47.8m OD. The site archive will be held at Derby City Museum, accession number DBYMU 2006-432.

Location of the site in relation to previous investigations

The southern end of the development area lies about 200m east of the Little Chester fort, on the east side of the River Derwent, and 50m north of the Roman road line leading to the east gate now called Old Chester Road. The site is therefore located in the area occupied by the Roman extramural settlement, which focused on the crossroads formed by Old Chester Road and the northern course of Rykniel Street, which passes to the east of the fort after crossing the Derwent to the south.

Evidence for the extramural settlement has been accumulating since the mid 1920s when over a kilometre of Rykniel Street (which runs between Wall and Chesterfield) was exposed to the north of the crossroads, with indications of a ribbon development of buildings for at least 250m (Sparey-Green 2002, 7). Similar ribbon development is suggested along the Old Chester Road line leading to the early second century pottery production centre and later domestic and industrial complex at Race Course Park, 1km to the east. Evidence from previous excavations indicates a Flavian-Trajanic foundation date for the fort and the development of the extramural settlement (Sparey-Green 2002, 7).

A third Roman road line is thought to run eastwards from Rocester, 50m to the north of the Antonine fort, having crossed the river to the north, at a bridge, the

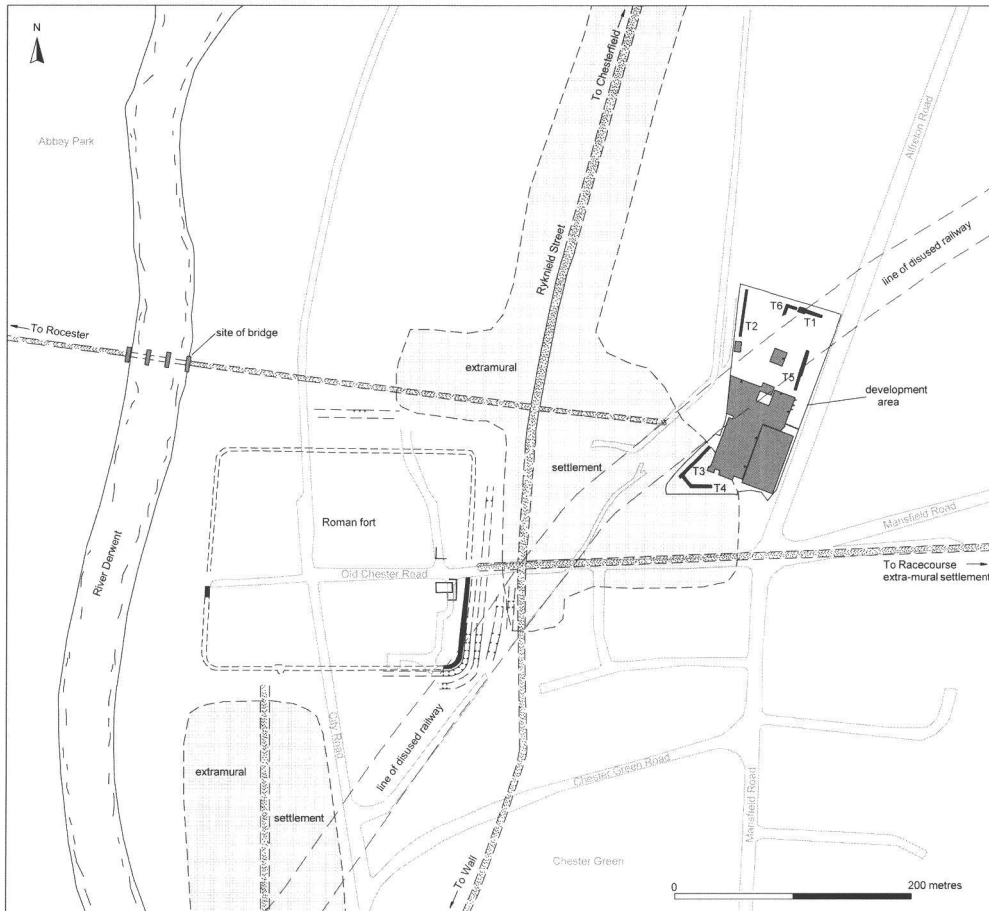


Fig. 1: Little Chester: plan of Roman Little Chester showing proposed development area in relation to fort and extra-mural settlement (after Sparey-Green 2002, figs 26 and 28; modern background by permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of HMSO, License number AL 100029495). Drawn by Gavin Speed.

surviving piers of which were recorded by William Stukeley in 1721, and subsequently crosses Ryknield Street about 150m west of the development area. Its eastward continuation, beyond the crossroads, was confirmed through excavation in 1973 to within about 50m of the development site (Sparey-Green 2002, fig. 1), and although it should logically continue through the southern half of it, the presence of buildings and petrol tanks prevented this being tested during this evaluation.

The dominant modern feature impacting on the south-eastern defences of the fort and continuing north-westwards, across the extramural settlement and the present site, is the line of the Great Northern Railway, constructed in 1888. Its subsequent dismantling and the re-development of the area, have presented most of the opportunities for excavation to take place, particularly during the early 1970s (Sparey-Green 2002) and including the present evaluation.

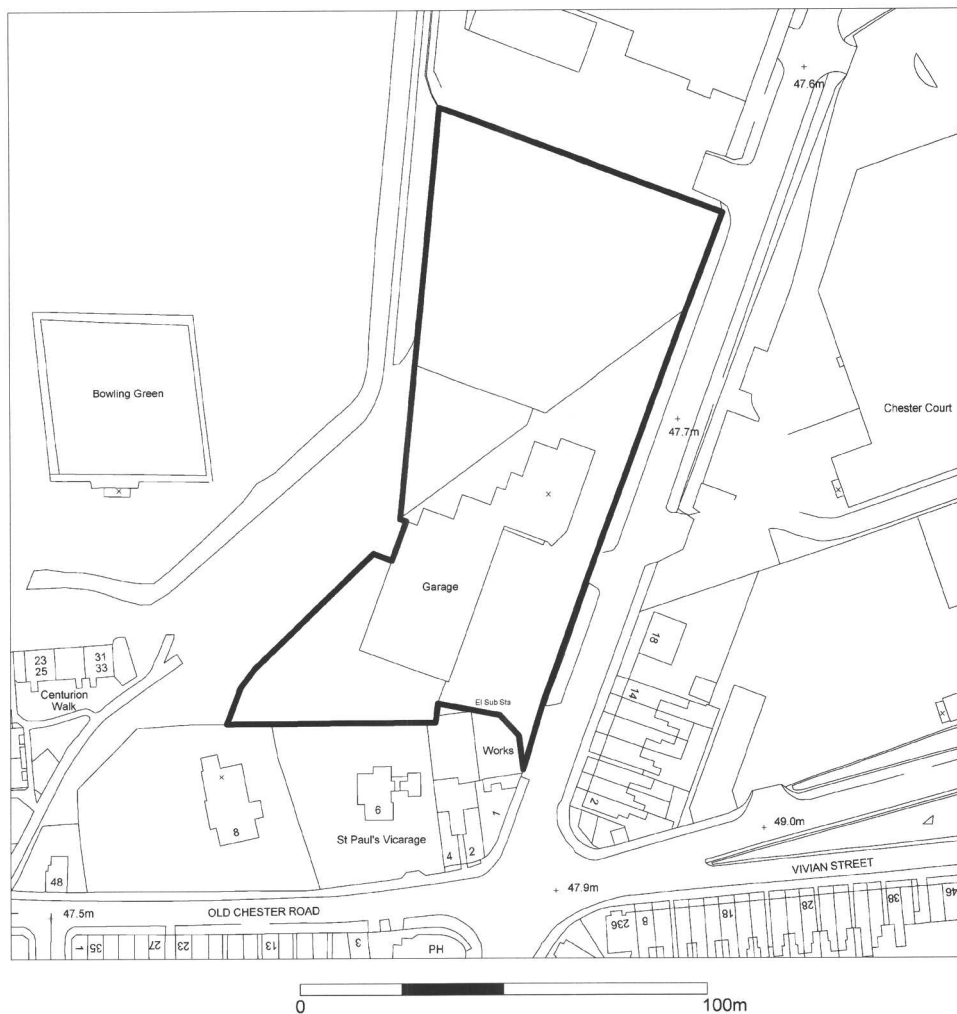


Fig. 2: Little Chester: site location showing site boundary and current buildings.

RESULTS OF EVALUATION

Six evaluation trenches up to 2m wide and examining a total of 269sq.m (3% of the site) were excavated (Fig. 3). The most significant evidence came from the southern end of the site where Trenches 3 and 4, revealed Roman occupation deposits from the mid first to second centuries sealed by medieval plough soils and ditches containing third-century Roman pottery residually. In the northern half of the site, Trenches 1, 2, 5 and 6 revealed the remains of the 19th century railway embankment, early 20th century pits, undated boundary ditches, probable medieval furrows and plough soils, and a flood deposit of 1965.

Description of the northern end of the site

Trenches 1, 2, 5 and 6 were excavated to evaluate the northern end of the development area (Fig. 3).

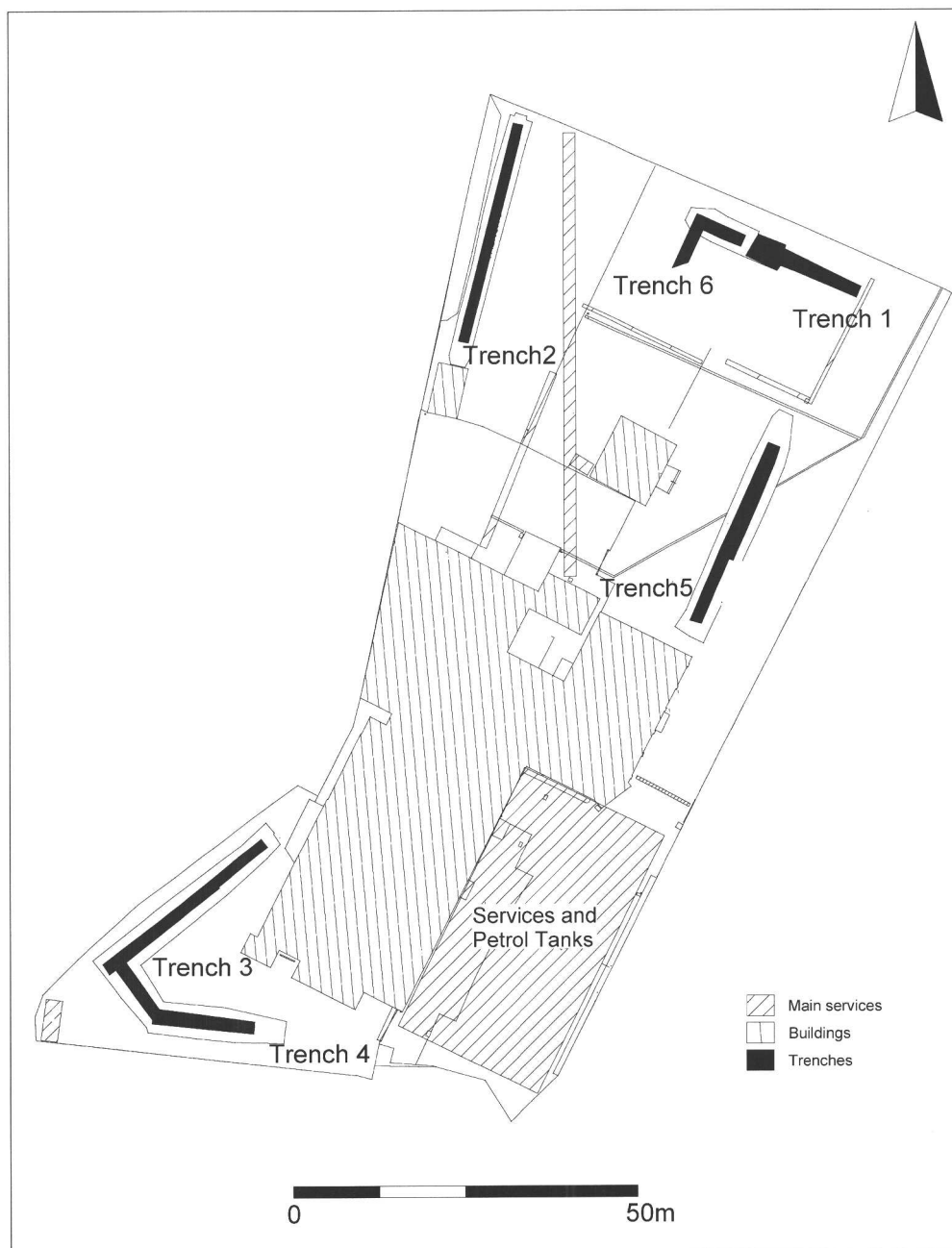


Fig. 3: Little Chester: trench locations in relation to existing buildings and services (background site map courtesy of Nick Downes, Tower Surveys Ltd).

Trench 1

This trench was 17m long and orientated north-west/south-east. It produced evidence for a railway embankment comprising a layer of irregular sandstone blocks, 0.4m thick, held in a red clay matrix, and a reinforced retaining wall defining its western edge. This belongs to the disused length of railway which ran diagonally across the development site in a north-east to south-west direction and was also detected in Trench 5. No other archaeological deposits or artefacts were recovered from the trench.

Trench 2

This trench was 33m long and orientated north-east/south-west. Beneath the overburden of *c.*0.7m, a uniform band of alluvium was reached of *c.*0.1m thickness and presumed to be the flood deposit from 1965 (Joan D'Arcy *pers. comm.*, also recorded in Trenches 5 and 6). This sealed a series of early twentieth century rubbish pits seen along the length of the trench, below which was evidence for cultivated alluvium. The southern edge of an undated gully was recorded running across the trench at the north end. No artefacts were recovered from the trench.

Trench 5

Trench five was 28m long and located towards the eastern side of the site. The railway embankment crossed the trench, diagonally, and below this, and a series of alluvial layers, were three undated gullies cut into natural. Gully [49] ran east-west whilst [51] and [53] ran north-south. Three furrows of probable medieval date were also observed; one running north-south and two east-west.

Trench 6

Trench 6 was 14m long and located in the north of the site adjacent to Trench 1. Below layers of alluvium were two undated and intercutting gullies, [63] and [65], running north-south. No artefacts were recovered from the trench.

Description of the southern end of the site

Trenches 3 and 4 were excavated to evaluate the south-western part of the development area (Figs 3–6).

Trench 3

Trench 3 was 30m long and orientated north-east by south-west. Beneath a compact layer of clay silt (6), containing medieval pottery and a large number of small abraded Roman pottery sherds as well as a glass bead, were five pits of irregular plan. Pit [15] was sub-circular in shape with a maximum diameter of 1.9m where it extended under the baulk and a depth of 0.36m. Its silty-clay fill (16) contained flecks of daub and charcoal along with pottery of late second century date. Pit [17] was irregular in shape with a maximum width of 2.6m and a depth of 0.3m. Fill (18) was identical to (16) and contained pottery of the mid second to early third century date. A small counter made from re-used samian ware was also recovered. The edge of Pit [29] was also observed and found to be part of pit [37] in Trench 4. Two further pits [23] and [25], truncated by pits [15] and [17] respectively, were not excavated. Immediately north of this group of features, but clearly of medieval date, a ditch [9] ran north/south across the trench,

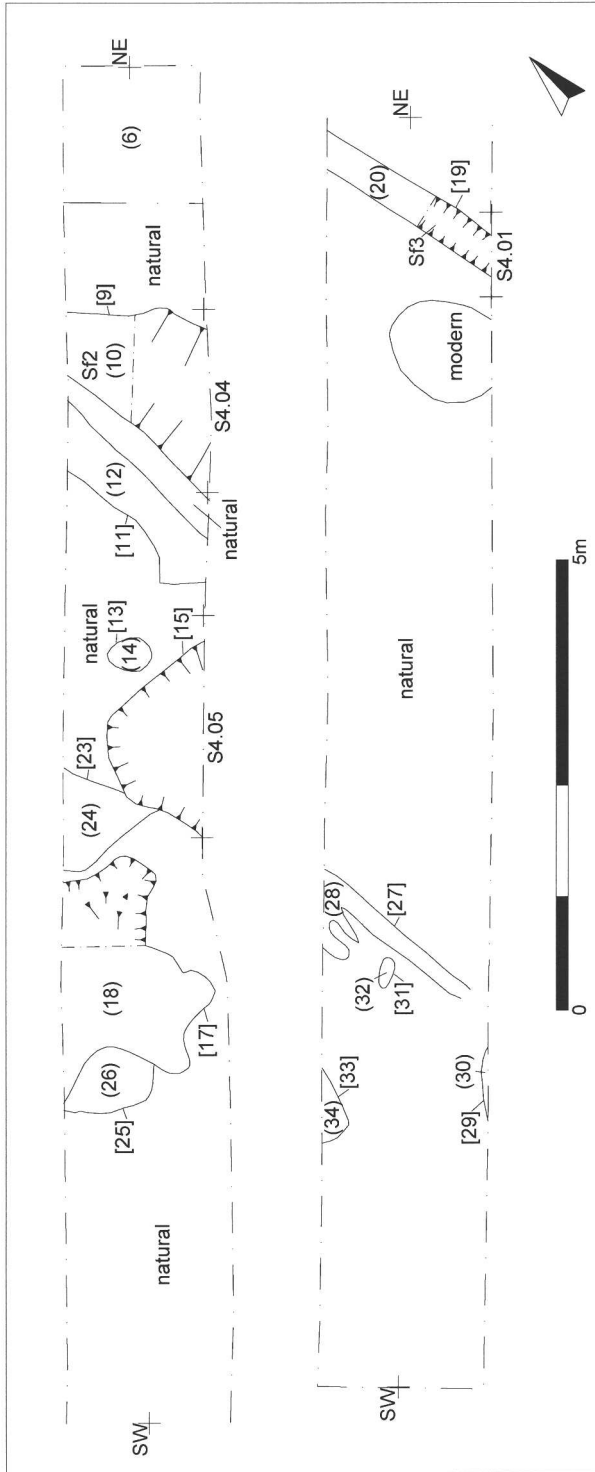


Fig. 4: Little Chester: Trench 3 showing revealed archaeology, interventions and section locations.

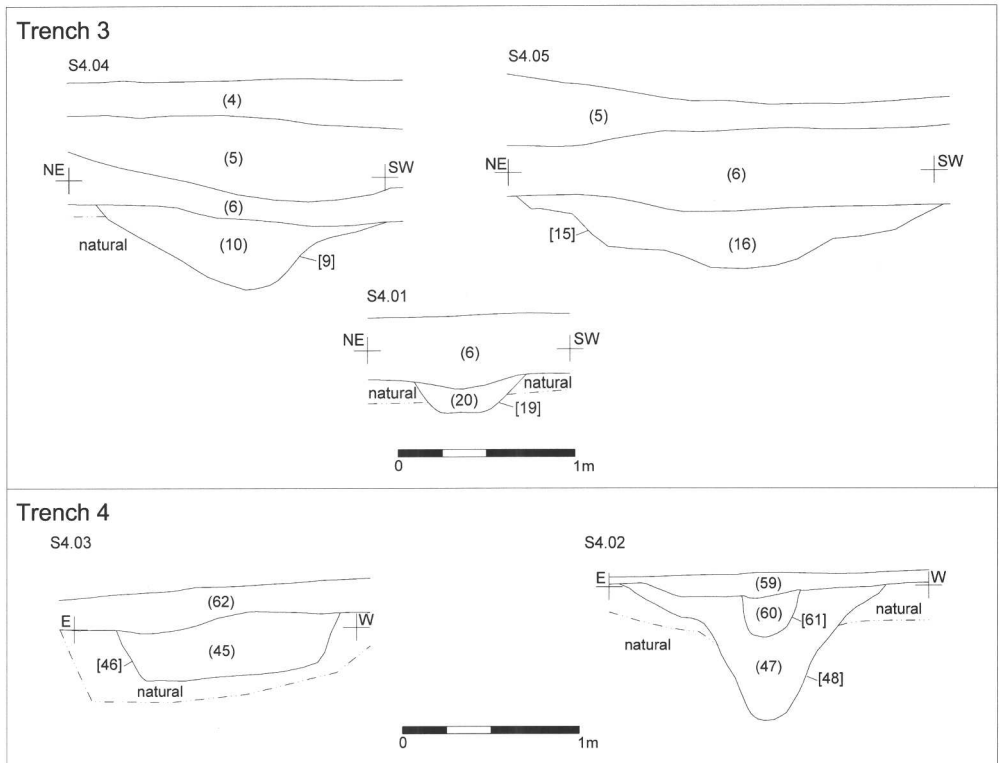


Fig. 5: Little Chester: sections of features in Trenches 3 and 4.

1.66m wide and 0.39m deep. The fills (8) and (10) contained 13th–14th century pottery with residual second century sherds and a Roman copper-alloy needle. Halfway along the length of the trench a narrow gully [19] ran north/south across it, 0.5m wide and 0.15m deep. The clay-silt fill (20) was dated by a worn copper alloy coin of the third century but also contained heavily abraded second century pottery. Two possible post-holes, [13] and [31] were observed in the northern and southern halves of the trench respectively but neither was excavated.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was 23m long and orientated north-west to south-east for 9m and then east-west for 14m (Figs 3 and 6). Excavation of early post-medieval layer (5) and medieval layer (6), identical in character to that in Trench 3, revealed two possibly intercutting features, [37] and [39], cutting natural in the western segment of the trench, which remained unexcavated. A sherd of Roman pottery came from the surface (40) of [39]. To the east of these features, layer (43=44) was observed across the width of the trench and contained late first to second century pottery.

Below (6) in the eastern sector was layer (59=62), a compact clayey-silt with frequent small daub fragments and charcoal flecks, containing second century pottery. Below it, post-hole [61] was observed in section, 0.31m in diameter and 0.25m deep

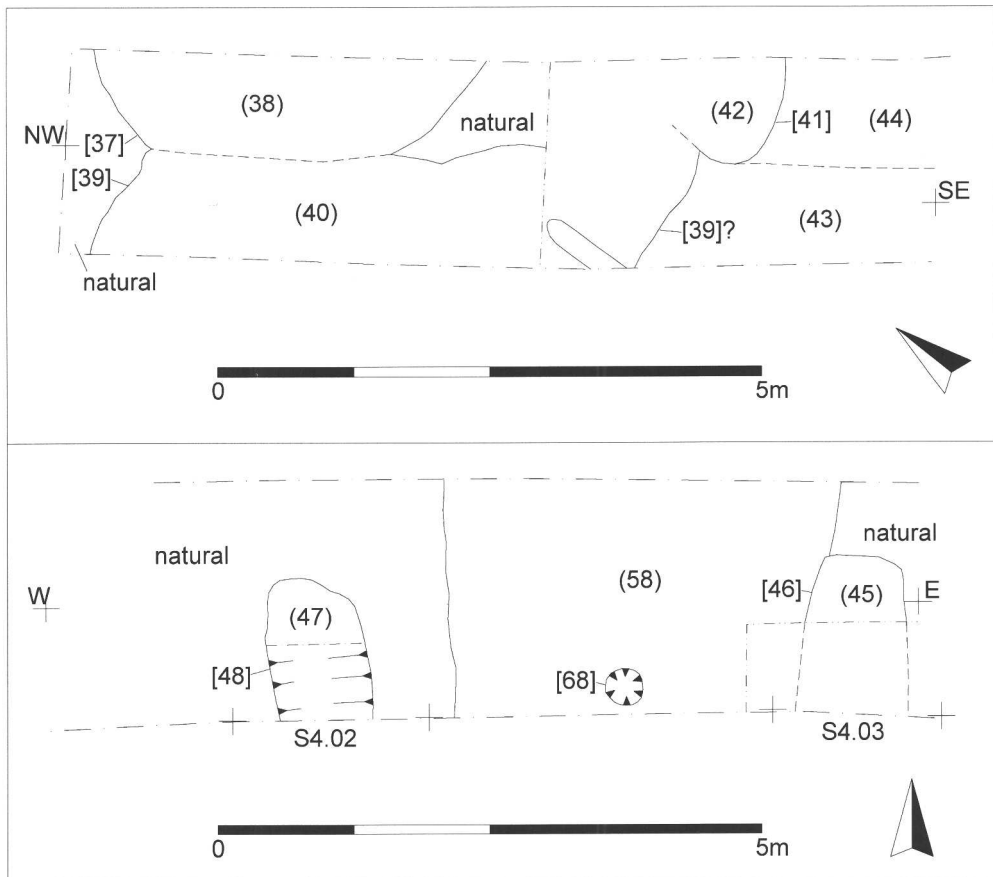


Fig. 6: Little Chester: Trench 4 showing revealed archaeology, interventions and section locations.

with near vertical sides and a curved base, cutting into the fill of ditch [48] (Fig. 5). Ditch [48] had shallow breaks of slope deepening to 80 degree sides with a curved base. It was 1.45m at its widest, though generally 0.8m at the break of slope, and was 0.75m deep. A 1.3m length orientated north/south with a rounded terminal was exposed. The clay-silt fill (47), again contained flecks of charcoal and pottery dating to the mid to late first century.

Below (59 = 62) to the east, was a 1.5m length of a shallow, flat-bottomed pit or ditch terminal [46] (Figs 6 and 7), orientated north-south, 1.3m wide and 0.36m deep. Fill (45) contained very frequent charcoal flecks and second century pottery. Post-hole [68] was observed below layer (6), but may have been below layer (59). It was 0.29m in diameter and 0.11m deep and its clay-silt fill (67) contained frequent charcoal flecks and daub. Both [68] and [46] cut into layer (58) which was observed across the trench for a distance of 3.7m. It is thought to be the same context as (43 = 44). Removal of these layers revealed no further archaeological evidence.

THE FINDS

Full reports on the following assemblages are held in archive.

The Roman pottery

By Elizabeth Johnson

Introduction

A stratified assemblage of 200 sherds of Roman pottery, weighing 1.639kg, was retrieved from Trench 3 (184 sherds; 1.42kg) and Trench 4 (16 sherds; 219g). The low average sherd weight for Trench 3 reflects the amount of abraded pottery from the medieval ploughsoil (6).

A summary of the fabric series used are given below

A quantified breakdown of the assemblage by fabric is given below.

Summary of pottery supply and dating

The assemblage as a whole spans the mid first to third centuries in date. Where pottery is stratified in Roman deposits these are of the mid first to second century with the majority of the diagnostic material indicating a date in the first half of the second century but with some pieces indicating a later second or early third century date. The majority of the pottery dating to the later second and third century occurs as abraded sherds within the medieval plough soil.

Ditch [48] is the earliest stratified and dated feature in Trench 4. Its fill (47) contained a group of six sherds dating to the mid to late first century, comprising an early shell-tempered ware jar with combed decoration, a sandy ware jar with a burnished rim and four grog tempered ware jars. These are all comparable to 'transitional' fabrics and forms with Late Iron Age antecedents found in Leicestershire (Pollard 1994, 74–76) in the decades following the Conquest. The ditch does not appear to have been truncated and there is no later material present. Of related significance a sherd of probable Gaulish white ware, probably from a butt beaker and dating to the middle of the first century was recovered from (22). In addition, a small amount of early grog-tempered

Code:	Fabric Type:	Code:	Fabric Type:
<i>Derby Fabric Series</i>		GRB1	Grey wares
AMP	Amphorae	MH	Mancetter-Hartshill Mortaria
BB1	Black Burnished ware	NV1	Nene Valley colour coated ware
BSA3	Black sandy ware	OAB1	Oxidised sandy wares
CTA1	Oxidised shelly ware	OAC1	"Pre-Derbyshire" ware
DBY	Derbyshire ware	TS	Samian ware
FLB	White slipped ware	FLA	White wares
GRA	Fine grey ware	GRB4	Gritty dark grey ware similar to BB1
<i>NRFC</i>		<i>Leicestershire Fabric Series</i>	
PNK GT	Soft pink grog ware	GT	Grog tempered wares (transitional)

Table 1: Summary of fabric series used (Pollard 1994, 112–114; Tomber and Dore 1998, 210; Leary 2001, 96–101).

Fabric	Sherds	% Sherds	Wt (g)	Av.Sh.Wt (g)
AMP	2	1.0%	53	26.5
BB1	2	1.0%	13	6.5
BSA3	6	3.0%	45	7.5
CTA1	4	2.0%	59	14.8
DBY	49	24.5%	443	9.0
FLB	3	1.5%	7	2.3
GRA	18	9.0%	48	2.7
GRB1	21	10.5%	116	5.5
GRB4	1	0.5%	3	3.0
GT	7	3.5%	87	12.4
MH	6	3.0%	97	16.2
NV1	8	4.0%	26	3.3
OAB1	27	13.5%	119	4.4
OAC1	1	0.5%	16	16.0
PNK GT	2	1.0%	70	35.0
TS	21	10.5%	217	10.3
FLA	22	11.0%	220	10.0
Total	200	100.0%	1639	8.2

Table 2: *Quantified analysis of the assemblage.*

were comparable to Todd's 'Trent Valley' ware dating from the mid to late first century (Todd 1968) was recovered from medieval layers (8) and (10) in Trench 3.

By the end of the first and through much of the second century, the majority of coarse wares are locally made, deriving largely from the kilns at Derby Racecourse, and comprising a range of grey, black sandy, oxidised, and white wares (Brassington 1971, 1980; Sparey-Green 2002, 152–154) and including beaded, everted and rebated rim jars with rusticated and rouletted decoration (Pollard 1994, 77–79; Leary 2001, 115–116). One sherd of 'pre-Derbyshire' ware associated with the Derby Racecourse kilns and dating to the mid to late second century was recovered from (16) (Brassington 1980, 33; Leary 2001, 118).

During the second half of the second century, Derbyshire ware from the Hazelwood and Holbrook kilns becomes the dominant coarse ware, forming a quarter of the assemblage, with jar forms including rounded and slightly hooked rims as well as the lid seated/cupped rims that become prevalent from the third century onwards (Leary 2001, 120; Sparey-Green 2002, 152–154). However, the regional import black-burnished ware (BB1) from Dorset, which comes to dominate Little Chester assemblages during the later third and early fourth centuries (Symonds 2002, 158, table 17), is notable by its paucity, represented by just two second century jar sherds from (14) and (16) in Trench 3. This would tend to support the impression of a lack of later Roman activity on the site. More unusual regional imports included pink grog tempered ware, from Buckinghamshire, from (6) (Booth and Green 1989, 80–82) and shell-tempered ware from Northamptonshire.

Contributing 10% of the assemblage, samian is the commonest fine ware, which again supports the overall second century dating of the assemblage. Whilst four sherds of South Gaulish material do occur, the majority is Central Gaulish, of second

century date, and comprising Form 27 cups, Form 18/31 dishes and Form 37 decorated bowls. By the later second century and possibly into the third, colour-coated ware beakers from the Nene Valley are present but all but one, from (26), are from the medieval plough soil (6).

Mortaria are solely from Mancetter-Hartshill ranging in date from the early second century through to reeded rims of the third century in (6). The single sherd from (18) dates from the mid second to the early third century. An example of Dressel 20 olive oil amphora was recovered from (6), whilst a sherd from (40) was in a lime-poor fabric from Tunisia associated with the *Africana II* amphora, which probably contained olive oil or fish products and is more common from the third century onwards (Peacock & Williams 1986, 155–156; Tomber and Dore 1998, 102).

Medieval and early post-medieval pottery

By Deborah Sawday

A small assemblage of 15 sherds weighing 80g was recovered from (5) and (6) from Trenches 3 and 4 and from (8) in Trench 3. All the pottery was abraded and probably the result of the manuring of the fields across the period. The Pink or Cream Sandy wares in (5) and (6) probably originate from Burley Hill (Coppack 1980), alternatively some of these sherds and those in Orange Gritty ware (8) may be the products of as yet unknown pottery production centres to the south of the county (Cumberpatch 2004, 88). All are thought to date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Ticknall, some 12km to the south, is the most likely source of the late medieval Midland Purple in (6) and the early post medieval Earthenware in (5).

Other finds

By Nicholas J. Cooper

Two Roman objects were retrieved; a barrel-shaped or globular bead in opaque milky white glass from (6) and a copper alloy sewing needle from (10), of Crummy's Type 3 (1983, 65), with a groove above and below a long rectangular eye. A single illegible radiate coin of third century date came from (20).

DISCUSSION

Evidence for Roman occupation in the development site was confined to the south-western corner, and whilst it is possible that undated features in the northern trenches could also be of that period, the fact that no pottery was retrieved, even residually, from those trenches would suggest otherwise. They are instead most likely to be medieval in date, considering the similarities of the fills with the overlying medieval alluvial flood deposits. Whether the evidence from Trenches 3 and 4 represents the northern extent of Roman settlement within the development site is not clear since the rest of the southern half of the area was unavailable for investigation due to the presence of modern buildings. The fact that the Roman road from Rocester is postulated to run through the site, to the north of Trenches 3 and 4, at that point, would raise the possibility that structures fronted on to it and that the features here relate to these, rather than the Old Chester Road frontage.

Considering the evidence from the southern end in more detail, the earliest dated feature is ditch [48] in Trench 4, tentatively dated to the decades after the Conquest. It is possible that this ‘transitional’ pottery was either still in use during the initial foundation of the fort and settlement in the Flavian period, before the kilns at the Race Course became operational, or relates to the pre-Flavian fort at Strutt’s Park across the river. Other evidence for riverside civilian settlement contemporary with the later phase of the Strutt’s Park fort has previously been recognised on the east bank during excavations of the North-West Sector of the Little Chester fort (Sparey-Green 2002, 122).

Evidence for timber structures is suggested by two post holes in Trench 4, one of which cuts ditch fill [47]. Timber buildings incorporating wattle and daub superstructures were characteristic of the Phase 1 settlement detected during excavation in 1971-2 (Sparey-Green 2002, 125) which were destroyed by fire in the mid Antonine period. The consistent nature of the fills of the Roman features in Trenches 3 ([17], [15] and [29]) and 4 ([37], [39], [41] and [46]), containing quantities of charcoal and fragments of daub, together with second century pottery, would suggest proximity to the burning and levelling of timber buildings at a broadly similar date. The poor quality of the Roman pottery assemblage does not allow us to tie in these events as closely as we otherwise might and although the majority of the diagnostic material need be no later than the mid Antonine period, there are a few pieces which fit more comfortably in a late second or early third century context. The latest Roman feature [19] dated by a worn third century coin, represent a distinctly later phase of activity which has been largely truncated by medieval ploughing.

CONCLUSION

The results of the evaluation are highly fragmentary and difficult to interpret within the emerging picture of the extramural settlement, particularly in the light of the highly disturbed nature of the development site, which limited the opportunities for investigation. They do, however, add a small piece to the jigsaw, previously missing, regarding the northerly extent of the ribbon development along the Old Chester Road. The findings of the evaluation led to a mitigation strategy whereby shallow foundations allowed the remains to be preserved *in situ*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The fieldwork was directed by John Tate, assisted by Keith Johnson and Dan Prior, and the project was managed by Richard Buckley. Thanks go to the clients, George Wimpey Ltd., for their co-operation, to Joan D’Arcy for her valuable local knowledge and to Ruth Leary for advice on the Roman pottery.

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The Society gratefully acknowledges the financial support of George Wimpey East Midlands Ltd in the publication of this paper.