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The Staff of the North Devon Record Office

1.0 Introduction

Location: Mole Valley Farmers Site, Station Road, South Molton
NGR: SS 7165 2600
District: North Devon
County: Devon

This archaeological assessment has been prepared by South West Archaeology at the request of Mr. Geoffrey Stephens of Mole Valley Farmers. The aim of the study is to place the site in its historical and landscape/townscape archaeological context in order to identify any areas of archaeological potential which may be affected by construction work during the redevelopment of the site and to make recommendations regarding the need for further archaeological intervention. This work was undertaken to the specification set by Devon County Archaeological Services (appendix 1).

1.1 Summary

South Molton originated as the centre of a Saxon estate with an important church and an extensive field-system. Against this background the borough of South Molton was created in the 13th century. The borough grew in prosperity, largely through the woollen trade and through the marketing of livestock. Prosperity declined in the 19th century, but was modestly restored in the 20th century.

The Mole Valley Farmers site lies within the area of the borough, and the history of the site reflects in varying degrees the history the town.

1.2 Geology

The underlying geology represents the Upper Carboniferous Bude Formation of alternating sandstones, siltstones and shales, the strata dipping generally to the south.

1.3 Methodology

The study comprises a summary of information drawn from cartographic and documentary materials held by the County Archaeological Service (HER), the Devon Record Office, the North Devon Record Office and the West Country Studies Library.

Assistance was also received from Sally Cotton and Shirley Bray of the South Molton and District Archive and Local History Society and from Mr Geoffrey Stephens of Mole Valley Farmers.

The desk-based element of this work was undertaken by Terry Green.

The site was visited on 11th October 2005 by Terry Green and Colin Humphreys.

2.0 Results of the Desk-based Study

2.1 South Molton - General

South Molton is a small, but important market town on the River Mole in North Devon. The town lies in an elevated position roughly half way between Barnstaple and Tiverton just off the A361 North Devon Link Road in rolling countryside on the southern fringe of Exmoor. South Molton was a royal manor in 1086 and was established as a borough in the 12th/13th century. The presence here in 1086 of four priests with a virgate of land is seen as an indication that the church of South Molton may have been a Saxon minster church. The fact that it was a royal manor, the centre of its own hundred and is traditionally the centre of a rural deanery all suggest its ancient importance. For many centuries it was a thriving centre for the marketing of livestock and farm produce. Cattle markets are still held twice a week and the town's covered pannier market is in business on Thursdays and Saturdays. From the medieval period until the late 18th century South Molton was deeply involved in the production of wool and woollen cloth, and was prosperous enough in the 1740's to commission the building of a magnificent guild-hall. The prosperity of the 18th and early 19th centuries is reflected in the buildings of Broad Street and East Street. The opening by the London and South Western Railway of a line from Exeter to Barnstaple in 1854 unfortunately placed South Molton Road Station too far away to be convenient and the cattle market lost out to Eggesford and Molland. The opening of the Taunton to Barnstaple railway in 1873 with a more convenient station did not greatly improve the situation and the town continued to decline commercially. Nevertheless the new station goods yard became the venue for a well-attended monthly cattle market. The area is now an industrial estate. The town has maintained importance as a sub-regional centre for local commerce, light industry and the tourist trade and within the NDDC Local Development Plan is designated for further residential and commercial development.

2.2 South Molton - Historic context

The earliest record of the name of South Molton – ie. *the (southern) –ton on the Mole* - is in the Domesday Book of 1086 where it is distinguished from North Molton, although the Geld (Taxation) Roll of 1084 records only *Moltone* (Gover, Mawer and Stenton 1932, 335). Whenever the division occurred, it is likely that in earlier Saxon times the manors of North and South Molton were a single unit quite possibly together with Bishop's and King's Nympton. Such large units of land based around a principle settlement with a river-derived name are thought to characterise land-holding in Britain before the development of manors and were frequently possessions of the Crown. There is a theoretical possibility that they date from pre-Saxon times. The suggestion of a minster church with a community of priests at South Molton further underlines the probable importance and antiquity of this settlement.

In the Domesday record of 1086 South Molton was held by the King (Thorn and Thorn 1985). It was subsequently granted to the Earl of Gloucester whose Barony embraced many Devonshire manors. Under the Earl of Gloucester it was held in 1278 by Nicholas Fitz Martin and in 1285 by his son, William. In 1343 the Martin estates were divided between sisters Elaeonor and Joan. South Molton was part of Eleanor's portion. However, both she and her husband died without issue later the same year, and the estate passed to her nephew James de Audley. James died without producing a line of descendants

and in the later 14th century possession reverted to the Crown. In 1389 it was granted to John Holland, Duke of Exeter. It remained a Holland possession until in the mid-16th century Anne, Duchess of Exeter died without issue (Reichel 1930, 77-8). Elizabeth I granted the estate to the Family of Whitmore who in the 17th century conveyed it to Hugh Squier from whom it was purchased in 1700 by the Corporation who now became Lords of the Manor (Lysons 1822, 348 - 352).

South Molton was not the only manor within the parish. Second in importance was the manor of Hacche, based at Hacche Barton halfway between South and North Molton. This manor possessed properties within the borough as well as in Bishop's Nympton. It was acquired by the Acland Family in the 18th century, but became dispersed in the 19th.

Known as the town's great benefactor, Hugh Squier was a very successful merchant who bequeathed to the town a fund with the purpose of maintaining a Free School which he had established in 1684. He was foresightful enough to allow that the Town Council should take the surplus profits after the school had taken a fixed sum. By the early 19th century the surplus had accrued to such an extent that the Town Council was able to embark on an ambitious scheme of civil engineering which comprised road building, the installation of piped water and sewage disposal and the provision of gas lighting (Martin 1979).

At some time between the mid-12th and mid-13th century a borough charter was acquired, and in 1327 a fair was granted. Numerous boroughs were created in this period, principally with the purpose of boosting manorial incomes. The scheme was to concentrate the freemen of the manor in a settlement consisting of a main street with houses gable-end on to the street and with long, narrow "burgage plots" behind (see Fig. 7). In return for certain privileges coupled with duties, the inhabitants would pay a fixed annual rent to the lord of the manor. The street would be wide enough to accommodate a regular weekly market from which the lord of the manor would also take a levy. Many boroughs set up in this way failed, but South Molton was successful, and in the reign of Edward I sent burgesses to parliament (only once, however, as it was expensive to do this and the town asked to be excused.) The town was incorporated in 1590, and its charter was renewed under Charles II in 1684 (Lysons 1822, 348 - 352).

In this context a flourishing wool trade grew up. The Lay Subsidy of 1332 records 5 tax-payers called Tucker (Erskine 1969) (a tucker was engaged in "tucking" or fulling the finished cloth), indicating woollen manufacture at that date, but the earliest specific mention of the trade is in a will of 1520. Town records of 1791 list 25 woolcombers and 13 serge weavers (Slee 1938, 215), and since a woolcomber employed 8 spinners, and since the population at the time was around 2500, it is clear that at least 10% of the population were thus engaged. In 1850 White's Directory still listed four woolcombers and mentioned active woollen mills.

Surrounded by good pasture, South Molton was for centuries a market place for cattle and sheep which also brought trade to the town market. The opening of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway in 1854, however, encouraged the development of alternative cattle markets in the vicinity of Eggesford and Molland, diverting trade from South Molton. When, after the fitful progress of the necessary bill through parliament, the Taunton to Barnstaple line was finally opened in 1873, it had a station on the North Molton road almost a mile to the north of the town, bringing no great benefit to trade (Edmunds 1986, 77). (The original plan had been to have a line passing through South Molton with a

station where the old gaol house stands.) Although a busy cattle market grew up at the new station, the traders in the town did not benefit, and had to wait for the universal use of motor transport to develop, before good business returned (*Ibid.* 82.)

2.3 The landscape context

With land for 40 ploughs and a value of £10 in 1086, it is clear that a large acreage of land was in cultivation. There were 12 villagers and their families, probably living in a loose agglomeration of dwellings on the edge of the cultivated land. Nearby in an eminent position would have stood the church. It is evident from the tithe map of 1844 (Fig. 5) and from the late 19th and 20th century mappings, that to west and east of the town long, narrow fields, which are best interpreted as the fossilised remains of medieval ploughlands, are arranged at right angles to an axis represented by Nadder Lane, West Street, Broad Street and East Street almost all the way to Mole Bridge. The land is on gentle slopes, largely south-facing. As all the fields respect the west-east route, it is fair to assume that the route pre-dates them. We do not know how old the ploughlands are, but as all other boundaries to north and south spring from their headlands (the banks of soil created by the turning of the plough), we can say that they are a primary element of the local field pattern. As appears to be the case elsewhere in Devon, the borough with its burgage plots, wide central street and market place was probably laid out within an existing field-system, the divisions between the ploughlands becoming the boundaries of the burgage plots (Weddell 1985, 96-100). (It may be that the southwards deflection of the axial route seen to the west of the church represents a deviation from the original line. On the evidence of plot boundaries, it has been suggested (Sally Cotton, pers.comm.) that this lay along the line of North Street, heading south-east towards Mole Bridge roughly at the point where Elysian Court is now situated. If this was the case, then with the laying out of the borough and the creation of a central street, this (possible) ancient route became the “back lane” to the burgage plots providing a routeway for goods, access to the fields beyond and perhaps somewhere to dump rubbish. North Street was apparently earlier named Back Lane.

The main south-north route through the town represents a link to Exeter, in one direction, and Barnstaple and the coast in the other. Another important route to the north is represented by Station Road, part of the road linking South and North Molton (See Fig’s 2, 3 & 4). If these settlements were anciently parts of the same estate, then it is reasonable to assume that the route is ancient. This route was the subject of improvement in or about 1860 when the Municipal Charity Trustees agreed that money from the Henry Squiers bequest should be used to improve the road to the new South Molton Station (Cock 1893, 62).

2.4 The development site

The Mole Valley Farmers site (a designated brown-field site) is located on the west side of Station Road, extending some 100 metres westwards between East Street and North Street (Fig. 8). It abuts the South Molton Conservation Area on its south side.

The earliest depiction that provides any detail is the Ordnance Survey Surveyor’s draft map of 1802 (Fig. 3). This shows the long burgage plots between East Street and North Street with what appears to be a fairly substantial building on the corner of East Street and what is now Station Road. Unfortunately the Surveyor’s Draft is usually too schematised to be very useful. The published version of 1809 (Fig. 4) is no more helpful. Normally the tithe map of the 1840’s provides the earliest useful detail. Unfortunately in this case (Fig’s 5 & 5A) detail is lacking, because all the buildings on East Street and any

inside Station Road are bundled together as “Part of the Town” (number 2235 on the tithe map). It is evident, however, that in the angle of Station Road and North Street was a small plot of ground numbered 1114a and named “Archers Meadow”. This was leased and occupied by Henry Baker. It will be seen on this map that the south-eastern angle of this meadow created a kink in the line of (what is now) Station Road. This was presumably removed in the 1860 road improvement, because on the OS maps of 1890 it is no longer evident. These maps provide the first fully detailed information on the site. On the 25-inch map of 1890 (Fig. 6) it can be seen that the former Archers Meadow had been turned into a formally laid out garden with fruit trees. On the western boundary were greenhouses and in the northwest corner was a small building, possibly a potting shed or some such. At this date the garden was part of the curtilage of Loughrigg, the house on the corner of East Street and Station Road. Immediately to the north of Loughrigg was an L-shaped block which was a stable, and to the west of the stable was another greenhouse. From the maps of 1904 (Fig’s 7 and 7A), on which a flagstaff (F.S.) is now shown, it seems that the garden and/or orchard had been done away with, though the greenhouses remained. The revised 6-inch map of 1938 shows no change. The next available mapping, a 1:2,500 of the 1960’s, shows considerable change. The former garden is now occupied by a builder’s yard with buildings along the boundary with North Street and a large building to the west beyond which is a building labelled YMCA. The builder’s yard belonged to a Mr Sanders who had a sawmill, probably in the buildings along North Street one of which, in the 1960’s mapping, is shown as open-fronted. To the south, the gardens (former burgage plots) and buildings on East Street were still intact. Mole Valley Farmers moved onto the site in about 1964. A subsequent mapping of 1978 shows substantially the same as in the previous decade, except that a splayed entrance has now been created on the Station Road boundary of the site. An aerial photograph dated 1974 (Plate 1), provided by Geoffrey Stephens of South Molton Farmers, shows this clearly. It also shows a large building to the west of the old stable and beyond it an open storage area where formerly was a garden. To the right of the entrance is a pair of small buildings which were visible on the earlier 1960’s map. To the south and west of the main group of buildings gardens were still intact. A 1:10000 map of 1999 shows essentially the present arrangement with structures and gardens to the rear of East Street (notably to the rear of numbers 19 and 20) removed.

The western part of the development area takes in a large part of an original burgage plot. The western boundary of the development area would appear to be an original burgage plot boundary, though inspection suggests it has been completely rebuilt. The north-western boundary of the development area (see Fig. 9: Archaeological Potential) may represent the original northern limit of burgage plots in this part of the town.

An important element of the potential development site is the old Town Gaol lying to the rear of numbers 22 and 23 East Street, which are now private houses, but which represent originally the houses of the governor and the police superintendent. The original complex, built c. 1838 and comprising the two houses, “six cells, two large day rooms, and an airing yard for prisoners” (White’s Directory of Devonshire 1850) has been divided, only the gaol being potentially affected by the development. Despite partial demolition, the remaining building is Grade II listed (IoE number 96924; Devon County HER PRN 14071).

2.5 Topography and evidence of trial pits on the site

Inspection of the site in relation to neighbouring properties strongly suggests that the original topography has been considerably altered with deeply made-up ground particularly along the southern part of the site. Comparison of the natural fall of the ground (as represented in Station Road) with the small remnant of garden to the rear of Loughrigg suggests that the slope may have originally been mitigated by terracing. This could account for some of the apparent make-up.

Boreholes sunk by Geotechnics during their survey of April 2005, confirm a considerable depth of made-up ground on the south side of the site, especially behind numbers 19 and 20 (more than 2 metres) and number 31 East Street (1 metre). To the north of the old stable, there is similarly a considerable depth of make-up (1.4 metres). Also in the north-east corner of the site (0.9 metres). The make-up is generally described as gravel, clay and cobbles with fragments of brick and slate. In most cases it overlies a gravelly clay which in turn overlies the natural carboniferous silt stone. None of the boreholes provided evidence of a buried loam (Geotechnics Report 2005, appendices 5 and 9).

2.6 Neighbouring properties

Properties to the south of the site are within the South Molton Conservation Area. "Loughrigg", on the corner of East Street and Station Road was requisitioned during WW2 and housed a Royal Engineers experimental training school. In 1994 a rock-cut chamber was noted in East Street outside this building (Devon County HER PRN 55384). Buildings to the north-west are outside the Conservation Area.

3.0 Conclusion

- South Molton has its origins as the centre of a pre-Conquest (Saxon) royal estate which also comprised North Molton.
- There was a well developed field-system lying along an east-west axial routway.
- The borough, created probably by the Lord of the Manor in the 13th century, was laid out within this field-system.
- The Mole Valley Farmers site lies within the compass of the borough.
- Properties along East Street would have had burgage plots to the rear with North Street as their “back lane”.
- An early east-west axial route may have crossed the site.
- The route represented by Station Road was anciently the link with North Molton and more recently was developed for access to the station and cattle market.
- 20th century developments on the site involved the removal of buildings and boundaries relating to properties in East Street.
- Since the 1840’s – and prior to acquiring its current use and lay-out - the site has been successively a meadow, an orchard, a garden and a builder’s yard with sawmill.

4.0 Archaeological Potential and Recommendations

(Refer to Fig. 8)

4.1 Archaeological potential

Depending on the degree to which the original topography has been retained:-

1. The subsoil may retain plough-marks from a period before the borough was laid out.
2. Signs of a roughly north-west – south-east track of early historic or prehistoric date may be evident across the middle of the site.
3. Evidence of burgage-plot boundaries may be preserved either below ground or in existing standing boundaries to the west and north-west. These may need to be examined and recorded.
4. Medieval or post-medieval rubbish-pits or latrine-pits may be in evidence in the central or north-western areas of the site.
5. In the central southern and south-eastern parts of the site there may be the foundations or footings of buildings recorded on maps of the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries. In addition there may be remains of a sawmill of mid-20th century date.
6. Remains of the town gaol, although not designated for development, are worthy of recording. Steps should be taken to ensure that it is not further damaged by development.
7. The eastern boundary of the site defines part of an ancient routeway. Although road improvements in 1860 may have obscured any archaeological remains, it should be noted that any ground disturbance in this area may reveal remains of former boundaries, road-surface or roadside ditches.

Any of these features may be present in any position on the site however fig 8 shows the areas that are more likely to contain buried archeology.

4.2 Recommendations

The results of this assessment suggest that the site has been the subject of development during several historic periods. Inspection has showed that the level of the site has been raised in several areas particularly to the south and adjacent to Station Road to the east. It is a strong possibility that the raising of the level of the site has sealed evidence of earlier usage. It is therefore suggested that archaeological evaluation is undertaken in areas that are considered to have the greatest archaeological potential to assess the presence and preservation of any buried archaeology. The results of this would inform a strategy for dealing with such remains if the development were to proceed.

The above is the opinion of the author, the decision to undertake further archaeological works would be made by Devon County Archaeological Services and would be the subject of a further brief.

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