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**BEDFORD HIGH STREET SOUTH
ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF**

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Highways Agency

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Preface

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Summary

A watching brief was carried out by Bedfordshire County Archaeology Service during improvement works on Bedford High Street in the section adjacent to St Paul's Square. The work allowed a very limited keyhole type examination of the High Street deposits between the projected extent of the outer bailey of Bedford Castle and a medieval cemetery.

The works involved the widening of the footway on the east side of the road and work on traffic signals. The majority of the ground work was carried out in the upper 0.5m, within layers of recent construction and build up comprised of mixed gravel and rubble. The pavement was lifted and a narrow strip on the line of the existing gutter was excavated down to a depth of 0.5m to take ducting. Deeper excavations, up to 0.7m, were confined to holes for drain pots and their connections.

Intact archaeological deposits dating to the Post Medieval period, were encountered 0.5m below the pavement, and undisturbed geology at c.0.4m below the carriageway.

Archaeological Background

The works were situated between the site of the medieval castle and St Paul's Square, Bedford, an area exceptionally noted for its archaeological sensitivity. The outer bailey of the Norman fortification is known to have extended up to the High Street¹. In 1995, excavations to the rear of buildings fronting the High Street, revealed evidence of Late Saxon occupation and industrial activity beneath the 12th century castle rampart². On the west side of the High Street in 1986, a medieval cemetery was discovered³ in which some of the burials were found merely 0.2m and 0.5m below pavement level. Further burials of possible Saxon date were found in 1998 during excavations beneath a building on the north side of the square⁴.

Watching Brief

An archaeological inspection was carried out on behalf of the Highways Agency, over a period of six days, between 16/06/99 and 25/06/99, during the deeper groundworks of the earlier part of the project. A written, drawn and digital photographic record was made in accordance with established standards and procedures for archaeological recording⁵.

The first inspection on the 16/06/99, was of a square test hole dug into the edge of the existing carriageway, level with the junction of Phoenix Chambers and No 13 (Polly Flinders craft shop). The hole was 0.6m by 0.5m and 0.5m in depth. The upper 0.47m from the surface of the paving consisted of bedding for the paving and mixed make up - construction deposits composed of concrete, yellow brown gravel and

¹ 'Archaeological recording to the rear of 29-41 High Street, Bedford'; Steadman. S, *Bedfordshire Archaeology*, Vol.23, pp. 135-6 1999

² *ibid*, 137-143

³ St. Paul's Square (BCAS forthcoming); BCAS Report SPS307

⁴ 14-15a St. Paul's Square (BCAS forthcoming); BCAS Report SP451

⁵ BCAS *Procedures Manual, Vol 1: Fieldwork* (1997); *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs*, Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994)



fragments of brick. Below these mixed deposits was a dark grey sandy silt containing occasional flecks of brick, tile and charcoal. It was cut by the construction trench of a brick drain or sewer.

Work commenced on the excavation of the trench for the ducting starting at the north and working towards the south. On 21/06/99 at 8m along the trench, excavation showed a mixed layer of make-up above brown soil at a depth of 0.5m. At 15m along the trench the mixed make up lay above a layer of black soil which in turn lay above the brown soil.

A deposit of skeletal remains was uncovered on 22/06/99, where the trench drew level with the north side of Castle Lane. The bones, which occurred within the mixed gravel, rubble layer, proved to be disarticulated animal remains.

The site was attended on 25/06/99 during the excavation of a trench linking up a drain. The trench was located in front of No 17 (Wallengers Sewing Centre) extending out into the road level with the south corner of Castle Lane. The trench measured 2.2m long and 0.7m deep. In the central part of the trench there was a ridge of mid red brown sandy gravel below the mixed rubble and gravel deposit, occurring at its highest point 0.4m below the surface of the carriageway. This may have been the natural, which below St Paul's Square consists of a mix of brick earth and gravel.

The first indications of possible intact archaeological deposits occurred at around 0.5m below the line of the pavement with dark sandy silt soils. These could not be dated, but the occasional flecks of brick and tile suggest that they are likely to be Post Medieval. No archaeological features were observed cutting these deposits. Possible natural ground was observed at 400mm below the carriageway. This is possible as the 1986 St Paul's excavations showed that there was no significant build up in this area, with medieval burials occurring close to the surface.

Although significant archaeological remains were not encountered, the results of these observations are an important contribution to our knowledge of the extent of archaeological deposits in this part of Bedford town. The results of the watching brief will be added to the Bedford Historic Environment Record, and the archive will be deposited at the Bedford Museum.