A short summary is provided here of a project aimed at securing and enhancing the excavation archive relating to a deserted medieval village at Church Wilne, Derbyshire (SK 449318). It is hoped that this will provide a secure foundation for further research and provide a springboard for publication. This work was funded by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund administered by English Heritage and was managed on behalf of Trent & Peak Archaeology by David Knight. Work on the site archive was conducted by Eileen Appleton and Panagiota Markoulaki (Trent & Peak Archaeology) between April and July 2009 (Appleton and Markoulaki 2009). Thanks are extended to Rachel Atherton (Derby City Museum and Art Gallery) and Paddy O’Hara (English Heritage) for their help during the completion of this work.

A detailed report on the archive contents may be downloaded from this site as a PDF file. The original archive and a security copy are stored with all finds from the site in Derby City Museum and Art Gallery (DBYMU 1997-75-6).

Background

The small medieval village of Church Wilne was located on marginal land in the broad alluvial floodplain of the River Derwent, close to its confluence with the River Trent and several kilometres upstream of the confluence of the Trent with the Rivers Soar and Erewash (Fig.1). All that survives today is the parish church of St Chad’s. This is an isolated building, located some 200m north of the modern river. The church may originally have been enclosed on three sides by a meander of the Derwent, the medieval course of which may be reconstructed from topographic, documentary, cartographic and excavation evidence. The last dwellings in the village were demolished in the 1960s, while the area adjacent to the church was converted after quarrying to a large reservoir (St Chad’s Water) within a water sports centre.

History of archaeological investigations

Faint earthwork traces near the church were identified in the late 1960’s as evidence of a deserted medieval village (Beresford and Hurst 1971, 185). Medieval sherds were recovered from the ploughed fields adjacent to the church during the succeeding decade, providing further evidence for extensive medieval occupation.

Threats from gravel quarrying prompted more extensive archaeological investigations in 1974 and 1975 by the Trent Valley Archaeological Research Committee, assisted by funding from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (England). This work was directed by Hazel Wheeler and conducted by TVARC staff and local volunteers.
Excavations presented an opportunity to study the relationship between the church, settlement and riverine landscape, and in particular to investigate the impact of changes in river course and flood frequency upon settlement development. Very few deserted medieval villages elsewhere in the Trent Valley have been excavated, notable exceptions including Thurvaston in Derbyshire and Adbolton in Nottinghamshire (Elliott et al 2004, 170-174), and the excavation results provide a valuable opportunity to research the development of a small settlement precariously located alongside the high-energy and flood-prone Derwent.

Results of 1974-75 archaeological excavations

Archaeological work commenced with a contour survey of the site and continued with excavations to the south and east of St Chad’s church. Trenches across a possible house platform to the south of the church revealed the ground plan of a rectangular building dated by associated finds to the fifteenth century (Fig. 2) and traces of buildings dated from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The fifteenth century building overlay an infilled river channel, which from sections excavated across it could be shown to have migrated progressively southwards away from the church. These sections revealed multiple water courses and abundant timber stakes (some sharpened), stratified beneath a ‘flood layer’ upon which the building had been established. The ‘flood layer’ provides interesting evidence for pre-fifteenth century alluviation and emphasises the dynamic nature of the floodplain environment. Further changes in river courses and extensive flooding may be postulated in later periods from studies of old maps, documentary records and parish boundaries, and may have been important factors in the abandonment of the site for settlement. The excavations included a wide variety of finds, including an Anglo-Saxon strap end (Fig. 3), iron slag, bone and pottery dated to between the 12th and 19th centuries, which would merit more detailed study and publication.

Post-excavation analysis

Funds could not be stretched to cover full post-excavation archiving and analysis, and the site was not carried forwards to publication. An unpublished draft summary report by Christopher Drage is available, together with the finds and other archive data, but a full discussion of the site and specialist reports were not completed. The documentary archive and finds were deposited in Derby Museum in 1995 (Accession No. 1997-75/6) but no further work was carried out until the present project.

April to July 2009: securing and enhancing the site archive

The recently published Archaeological Resource Assessment and Research Agenda for the East Midlands highlights the phenomenon of settlement desertion as a key area for further research (Lewis 2006, 192-193, 212) and has emphasised the need to proceed with the analysis and publication of data from key sites and surveys that have not yet been published (ibid. 216). Church Wilne is one of very few excavated deserted or shrunken medieval villages in the Trent Valley (Elliott et al 2004, 170-174), and within the regional context ranks as a site of particular interest.
The principal aim of this project was to secure and enhance the site archive by:

1. ensuring that all documentation, photographs and drawings are well organised and indexed and hence readily accessible for future researchers
2. collating existing catalogues of artefacts and environmental remains and all available specialist reports as a basis for MAP2 assessment of artefacts and ecofacts
3. providing a complete set of radiographs and descriptions for all iron artefacts
4. identifying any specialist conservation requirements for the artefacts retrieved during excavation (principally iron and copper alloy artefacts)
5. completing any outstanding packaging and processing of artefacts and ecofacts
6. providing a summary report of the archive contents

A further stage of assessment is proposed to outline the research and publication potential of the collection and to explore the option for making data available as an on-line resource accessible to researchers.

References

Appleton, E. and Markoulaki, P 2009 Church Wilne, Derbyshire: Contents of Site Archive, Trent & Peak Archaeology, University of Nottingham (unpublished report in Derby City Museum and Art Gallery: DBYMU 1997-75/6).


Fig. 1 Church Wilne, Derbyshire: location of 1974-75 excavations. Copyright: Trent & Peak Archaeology, University of Nottingham
Fig. 2. Church Wilne, Derbyshire: linear spreads of pebbles marking the foundations of a late medieval rectangular building (Structure 1); St Chad’s Church in background. Copyright: Trent & Peak Archaeology, University of Nottingham

Fig. 3. Church Wilne, Derbyshire: Late Saxon copper alloy strap end (length 35mm). Copyright: Trent & Peak Archaeology, University of Nottingham