

New Care and Custody Unit, HMYOI Portland, Easton, Portland, Dorset

Archaeological Observations, January 2002

SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was carried during the construction of a new Care and Custody Unit in HM Young Offenders Institution, Portland, Dorset. Traces of a former prison building, probably dating to the late 19th century, were uncovered. No other archaeological features or deposits were encountered.

INTRODUCTION

Terrain Archaeology was requested to undertake archaeological observations and recording of the groundworks during the construction of a new Care and Custody Unit in HMYOI Portland.

The site (centred on NGR SY702723) is situated within the southwestern corner of HM Young Offenders Institution, Portland, Dorset. The ground surface was flat and covered by a tarmac surface.

HMYOI Portland lies on the western side of Portland above the coastal slopes of East Weares. The site lies at about 105 m above Ordnance Datum. The solid geology is Lower Purbeck beds (Geological Survey of England and Wales Sheet 341/2 *West Fleet and Weymouth* 1:50000 Drift 1976).

The fieldwork was carried out on 22 January 2002 by Peter Bellamy.

Terrain Archaeology would like to acknowledge the help and cooperation of Richardsons (Nyewood) Ltd and in particular Kevin Thompson, and also the staff of HMYOI Portland.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A Romano-British cemetery with nearly 200 graves was found in the Breakwater Quarries (at c. SY697725), close to HMYOI Portland (RCHME 1970, 606-7). The burials were mainly in stone cists but a number of stone sarcophagi were also found. These sarcophagi are now within HMYOI Portland. A number of pits were also found. Quantities of Roman pottery, coins, metalwork, animal bones, etc were recovered.

Recent excavations by AC Archaeology in Broadcroft Quarry, to the south of the site, have revealed significant traces of Iron Age settlement.

Excavations in the grounds of St Stephen's Vicarage, Grove, have revealed the remains of a series of substantial stone-built structures, thought by the excavator to be the remains of early ecclesiastical buildings (Palmer 1999).

Portland Prison was established as a temporary prison in 1848 to provide convict labour for the construction of the breakwater in Portland Harbour, and was subsequently made permanent in 1869. The convicts were housed in wooden framed buildings, later replaced in stone. Five new accommodation blocks were constructed between 1896–1908. The convict prison was moved to The Verne in 1920–21. The prison was then reopened as a Borstal.



AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of the archaeological observations is to establish and make available information about the archaeological resource existing on the site.

The archaeological works aimed to observe and record all the in situ archaeological deposits and features revealed during the groundworks to an appropriate professional standard.

METHODOLOGY

The observations were carried out in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (1994, rev. 1999).

The majority of the footings trenches had been excavated by a mechanical excavator fitted with a toothed bucket, prior to Terrain Archaeology being contacted. The trenches were open and available for close inspection.

Brief notes were made on site but no attempt was made to produce a plan of the trenches or to produce a detailed location map. No photographic record was made.

RESULTS

The footprint of the new building measured about 20 m by 12 m across. The footings trenches measured about 1.2 m wide and 1.65 m deep.

A typical section through the deposits comprised a tarmac surface over a layer of crushed stone and larger stone rubble, which was between 0.6 m and 0.8 m thick. This sealed a layer of dark brown clay with traces of iron panning, 0.2 m thick, overlying reddish-brown clay with frequent rounded limestone inclusions. Both of the lower layers are thought to be natural.

Along the western side of the building footprint substantial wall footings were revealed. These footings were about 1 m thick and went down to a depth of about 1.2 m below present ground level. The footings were constructed from mortared limestone blocks (measuring 0.35 m by 0.35 m by 0.55 m). The building materials and type of construction is identical to the original prison buildings.

Frequent service trenches were also noted.

CONCLUSIONS

No archaeological features or deposits dating to before the construction of the prison in 1849 were observed.

The stone footings clearly belong to a former prison building, probably built during the building campaign of 1896–1908. It had been a two-storeyed L-shaped building tucked between Benbow, Raleigh and Drake Houses and the southwest corner of the perimeter wall. This building is clearly seen in photographs taken in 1920–21 just before the closure of the convict prison (Legg 2000, 15). The precise date of the demolition was not researched – but is likely to have been during the 1960s–70s.



PROJECT ARCHIVE

The archive will be deposited with the Dorset County Museum, which has agreed in principle to accept the archive, subject to fulfilment of the Museum's requirements of the preparation of archaeological archives. A copy of the microfilmed archive will be deposited with the National Monuments Record.

The indexed and cross-referenced project archive consists of: –

- File 1: 1.1 Written Scheme of Investigation T3075
1.2 Report 5098.1
1.3 Field Notes

REFERENCES

- Legg, D. R. G., 2000 *Portland Prison Illustrated*.
- RCHME 1970 = *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of England An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in the County of Dorset 2 South-east*.
- Palmer, S., 1999 'Excavations of previously unknown buildings in the grounds of St Stephen's vicarage, Grove, Portland' *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society* **121**, 69-76.





Figure 1: Location Map