

*Marches Archaeology*

Bilston Urban Village

A report on an archaeological watching brief

NGR: SO 945 956

Report by

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# Bilston Urban Village

## Report on an archaeological watching brief

### *Summary*

*Archaeological monitoring was carried out on engineering trial trenches to determine the archaeological potential of the site. Overburden of at least six metres was expected, and found. In only two trenches were archaeological deposits seen. An interesting aspect was the level of industrial activity that must have existed before the canal was constructed, the spur of the canal is a contour cut, in that it does not involve locks, and therefore, several metres of material must have been deposited prior to the construction of the canal shortly after the enabling act of 1768. Industrial development continued into the early 20th century but decline has set in since then. It is now proposed to redevelop the site as an 'Urban Village'.*

### **1 Introduction**

A planning application was submitted to the local planning authority for permission to develop an area of open land beside the canal at Bilston. The site is centred on NGR: SO 945 956 (fig 1).

The site lies within an area that is thought to contain elements of medieval Bilston, lying on the direct route to Dudley. The Local Planning Authority's Archaeology Advisor advised that in order that the archaeological resource is adequately protected an archaeological watching brief be carried out during ground works associated with the development.

The Local Planning Authority's Archaeology Advisor produced a "Brief for an archaeological watching brief". CPM (the client) commissioned Marches Archaeology to provide the archaeological services detailed in the Brief.

### **2 Archaeological and historical background**

The documentary background of the site was recorded in a desk-based assessment carried out by BUAFU (Ramsey, 2003) so only a brief précis will be recorded here.

The settlement of Bilston was in existence by at least the 10th century where a land grant is recorded giving property to Lady Wulfruna by Aethelred in 985. It is listed in the Domesday book as:

*In Bilston 2 hides. Land for 4 ploughs.  
8 villagers and 3 smallholders with 3 ploughs.  
Meadow, 1 acre; woodland ½ league long and ½ wide.  
The value was 20s; now 30s.*

Since this early start, Bilston did not do well until the start of the industrial revolution, when with the coming of the canal the town blossomed onto an industrial centre that met the needs of the growing demands from the developing world.

Collieries and mines proliferated in the area of the development but gradually fell out of use during the latter half of the 19th century and by early in the 20th century the land had largely been cleared depositing a thick layer of furnace and colliery waste up to 15 metres thick over the site. In the middle of the 20th century part of the site was used for tipping refuse.

### **3 Scope and aims of the project**

The scope of the project is defined in the Brief as:

- { observation of all topsoil stripping, other earthmoving and trench excavation until natural subsoil is reached within the areas identified by the desk-based assessment as being of archaeological potential.

- { the sequence of soil deposits present and all archaeological deposits and features shall be recorded

- { all artefacts shall be collected, identified and catalogued

- { if significant archaeology is identified the archaeologist on site should inform the County Archaeological Officer and Project Engineer immediately in order that appropriate action may be taken to minimise the damage to such deposits and to record them appropriately.

The purpose of an archaeological watching brief is defined by the Institute of Field Archaeologists as:

‘to allow, within the resources available, the preservation by record of archaeological deposits, the presence and nature of which could not be established (or established with sufficient accuracy) in advance of development or other potentially disruptive works’

and:

‘to provide an opportunity, if needed, for the watching archaeologist to signal to all interested parties, before the destruction of the material in question, that an archaeological find has been made for which the resources allocated to the watching brief itself are not sufficient to support a treatment to a satisfactory and proper standard’.

### **4 Methodology**

#### *Documentary research*

Primary and secondary sources have already been consulted during the BUFAU assessment and an earlier report (White, 1998) so no further work is required at the present time.

#### *Fieldwork*

Observations and appropriate recording was undertaken of all ground breaking activity in the areas identified as having archaeological potential in the BUFAU report (fig 2).

The recording system includes written, drawn and photographic data. The primary written record is by means of site notes, accompanied by sketches. Context numbers were allocated and trench record sheets completed. The photographic record was made using black and white negative and colour transparency film.

### *Office work*

On completion of fieldwork a site archive was prepared. The written, drawn and photographic data were catalogued and cross-referenced and a summary produced. No artefactual and ecofactual data was recovered that required processing. After an initial assessment all unstratified non-diagnostic artefacts and ecofacts and non-diagnostic samples were discarded.

## **5 The watching brief**

A total of twenty four trial pits were watched, The majority were 6 metres long and 1.5 metres wide but some on the playing field of the Bilston Education Centre were 2.5 metres long by 0.6m wide. All trenches were between 5 and 6 metres deep, so the lower soils were only inspected visually on health and safety grounds. The playing field was significantly lower than the surrounding area and therefore the soil profiles are more likely to reflect the original depositional history of the area.

Trial pit 111 was situated to the west of Barnfield Road in an area of potential medieval ribbon development. It was 4.5 metres long, 1.5 metres wide and 6 metres deep. At the base of the trench was a dark reddish brown gritty silt with iron staining which produced 19th century pottery. The bulk of the trench consisted of colliery waste with the occasional piece of slag that produced late 19th/early 20th century pottery. This was overlain by a thin layer of topsoil.

Trial pit 117 lay to the east of Barnfield Road on the top of a bank some 6 metres higher than the road. At the base of the trench was a black loam with pale grey clay streaks above which was a black gritty industrial waste deposit that produced 19th/20th century pottery. A thick layer of pale yellowish brown clay separated this from a layer of brick and concrete rubble. A layer of colliery waste and black clinker overlay this and the top 1.2 metres of the trench was filled with demolition rubble, including asbestos topped by a very thin topsoil layer.

Trial pit 118 lay further to the east. Beneath the tarmac surface and associated hardcore make-up was a layer of orange and grey clayey silt, which turned into a shale with depth.

Trial pit 128 lay in a coppice to the west of Dudley Street. The bulk of the trench was filled by a layer of ash and rubbish dating to the early 1960s as evidenced by bundles of un-rotted newspapers found amongst the rubbish. Above this was a dark brown loam, which produced a lot of slag, brick and bottles. It was covered by a reddish brown sand and a brown light woodland soil.

Trial pit 129 lay in relatively young woodland to the west of a track leading from Carder Crescent to Dudley Street. The lower half of the trench was filled with dark grey colliery waste covered by a thick layer of black soil that contained a blueish-white slag. Above this

was a darker slag in a dark reddish brown matrix. Immediately below the turf was a layer of black slag.

Trial pit 133 was one of those on the playing field at the northern end. Pale grey siltstone was found at a depth of 3 metres covered by a layer of pale brown gritty silt. Above this was a 2 metre thick layer of gritty black soil with occasional bricks. A thin layer of grey ash separated this from a layer of reddish brown sand, before more of the black gritty soil underlay the turf.

Trial pit 134 was in the north east corner of the playing field and beneath 0.2m of turf was a pale to mid grey siltstone from the coal measures for the full depth.

Trial pit 135 was situated just to the west of the ball court on the playing field and was 3.6 metres deep. In the base was a very dark greyish brown gritty soil covered by a 2m thick deposit of the grey siltstone immediately below the turf.

Trial pit 137 lay at the western edge of the playing field beside the remains of a demolished building. A very dark grey silt over 1m thick lay in the base above which there was a 1m thick layer of pink clay. A 0.6m thick layer of rust stained soil lay above the clay and was covered by 1.65m of ash, gravel, clinker and slag that lay directly below the tarmac.

Trial pit 138 lay towards the centre of the playing field in the southern half. It contained grey siltstone of the coal measures topped by a 1m thick layer of black gritty soil. In turn this was covered by a thin layer of decayed grey siltstone and the turf.

Trial pit 139 was located against the western hedge towards the southern end of the playing field. In the base of the trench was a mottled pale to dark grey clayey silt. Lying on this at a depth of 2.5 metres was a brick floor. The floor was buried by a brownish mix of brick dust and soil for a depth of 1m. A brick footing was seen at the north end of the trench between the depths of 1.1 metres and 1.7 metres covered by a layer of brick rubble. The rubble was sealed by a black silt layer that was covered by a gritty layer of fire waste that varied in colour being red, black and grey. Immediately above this was the turf.

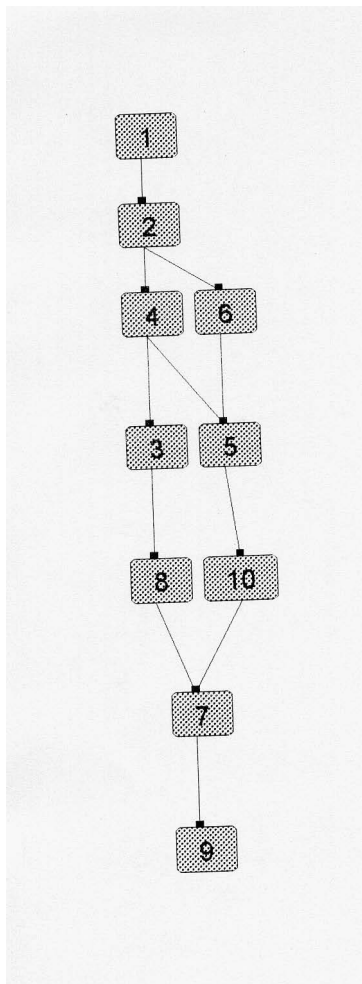
Trial pit 143 was sited on the disused Oxford, Worcester and Wolverhampton Railway embankment the lowest deposit seen was a red sand and gravel layer. Above this was a 2m thick layer of reddish brown sand becoming a stronger red towards the top. This was sealed by a 2m thick layer of black ashy material. Above this was a thin layer of red and yellow slag which was covered by a layer of black gritty soil containing slag and then the topsoil. All the lower deposits sloped to the north and east showing the deliberate build up of the embankment.

Trial pit 149 was positioned in a small coppice on the line of the embankment for the dismantled Oxford, Worcester and Wolverhampton Railway. The lowest deposit seen was a gritty reddish brown soil containing slag. This was sealed by a 3.5m thick layer pale grey clayey silt veined with black gritty lenses. Above this layer was a yellowish brown clayey silt containing rare brick fragments sealed by a layer of grey ash. A light woodland soil some 0.5m thick had accumulated over this.

Trial pit 150 was located further south along the embankment closer to the canal. A layer of reddish brown sand and slag filled the bottom metre of the trench. A thick deposit of coal

dust and colliery waste nearly 2m thick lay above and this was sealed by black gritty waste with brick and concrete. This layer was split into two by a 0.4m thick band of white furnace slag and concreted ash. The whole trench was topped off with a layer of topsoil.

Trial pit 151 was situated close to the canal in an area identified as once having been a canal basin alongside the railway. The lowest deposit seen was a grey alluvium [09] which underlay a brick floor [07] that was at a depth of 3.7 metres below current ground surface. A brick wall [08] ran against the western baulk and appeared to constrain floor [07]. Across the north end of the trench a block of brick masonry [10] stood 9 courses high and extended for 1m within the trench. A wall of slag blocks [05] was built from [10] surviving to within 0.5m of the ground surface and ran the whole length of the trench. It leaned in towards the top, apparently deliberately. The fill behind, to the west of the wall, was a slag and mortar mix [03] similar to the rubble infill found in stone walls and suggesting that wall [08] had originally stood to a greater height. To the north of the wall was a very dark grey gritty loam which had built up against the wall. Cutting [03] was a brick and mortar foundation for a later wall [04]. The whole trench was sealed by a dark grey soil containing slag [02] and the topsoil [01].



Matrix of trial pit 151

It would appear that the wall [05] was a retaining wall and possibly the east wall of the canal basin. With the earlier structures seen at the base of the trench the basin seems to have undergone some changes during its lifetime.

Trial pit 152 was located to find the canal basin serving the Capponfield Furnace. The earliest deposit seen was grey gleyed clay. A brick wall 16 courses high was found 1.5 metres below the ground surface. It was more than 1.5 metres wide and probably represents the edge of the basin. This was covered by black furnace waste above which were a thick layer of demolition rubble and the topsoil.

Trial pit 153 was also in the area of the Capponfield basin. The earliest layer seen was a thick layer of furnace slag. This was cut by a linear feature over 3 metres long with a vertical side that was filled by a mixed ashy deposit. Above this was a thick layer of redeposited grey clay covered by brick and concrete rubble in a brown loam matrix and the topsoil.

Trial pit 154 was located within the footprint of the Capponfield Furnace. The earliest layer seen was a deposit of slag and brick rubble in a brown matrix. A concrete floor was laid on this layer with a cable duct running the length of the trench. Against the northern side of the trench was a 2 metre + high block of concrete which may have been the rear of a cellar wall. At the west end of the trench was another concrete floor at a slightly higher level which was 1.2 metres thick. The rest of the trench was filled with demolition rubble.

Trial pit 166 was situated in the area of the Bankfield Ironworks. The earliest layer seen was a thick deposit of crushed bricks and masonry fragments over 2 metres thick. Above this was a 1 metre thick layer of dark gritty soil which was covered with another layer of brick rubble. The upper 2.5 metres of the trench were filled with various tips of industrial waste ranging from black clinker to white ash.

Trial pit 168 was situated on a bank just to the east of the playing field. The earliest layer seen was a pale grey alluvium over 1 metre thick, which may have been natural. Above this was a brown loam 0.5m thick. This was covered by a 1.4 metre thick pale grey stony layer which lay beneath more than 2 metres of slag in various matrices, and the topsoil.

Trial pit 169 was situated on the playing field towards its eastern edge. The lowest deposit consisted of a brown gritty soil covered by 2.8 metres of pale grey siltstone of the coal measures and then the levelling layer for the turf of the playing field surface.

Trial pit 170 was situated mid-way between pits 151 and 152. Grey alluvium was seen in the base of the pit. Fast flowing water was encountered at a depth of 2.7 metres at which level there was a layer of gravel. A rendered wall ran North South against the west baulk of the trench at just over 2 metres below ground level. The upper filling of the trench was a dump of black colliery waste and concrete.

Trial pit 171 was beside the canal on the site of the Capponfield basin. The lowest deposit seen was a pale grey alluvium. A blockwork wall parallel to the canal stood 2 metres high the construction cut for this wall was visible from 800mm below the ground surface. To the north of this a brick wall standing to 2.2 metres high angled away from the canal to the east. This

may have been the original entrance to the basin. Both walls were covered by a mixed layer of pink clay and brown sand and demolition rubble.

Trial pit 177 was on the site of the Capponfield Furnace. The lowest deposit was a dump of flue bricks and concrete breezeblocks in a black soil matrix. Above this was a layer, 2.8 metres thick, of brown sand and slag, presumably from the casting floor. Black coal dust and colliery waste sealed this layer and was, in turn, covered by a thin deposit of demolition rubble.

## **6 Discussion**

The results of the watching brief were archaeologically disappointing. Evidence was found for the canal basins in the vicinity of the Capponfield Furnace, and it might be possible to reopen these for incorporation into the overall scheme. However, in all the other trenches nothing of interest was seen and in the vast majority of cases natural was not reached.

Eleanor Ramsey in her report for BUFAU recommended that archaeological trial trenching take place in areas of archaeological interest 2, 3 and 5. It is the opinion of the present author that due to the depth of overburden, that has proved to be nowhere less than 6 metres thick, such an option is not viable. The cost of excavation, with all the health and safety considerations would be disproportional to any expected results.

However, if in any of these areas of interest the overburden has to be removed, either for the reason of contamination or landscaping for the scheme, then the possibility of archaeological trial trenching should be reconsidered as the archaeological element of the cost would be significantly reduced.

## **7 References**

Ramsey, E, *Bilston Urban Village: Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment Supplement*, Birmingham Archaeology Project 1122, 2003