

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATION
AND RECORDING OF
A RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT
BETWEEN PEEL CLOSE & ORCHARD WAY
TOPSHAM, EXETER, 1999**

by

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report describes the results of a programme of archaeological observation and recording (a watching brief) undertaken by Exeter Archaeology (EA) in May and September 1999 during groundworks for a residential development situated between Peel Close and Orchard Way, Topsham, Exeter (centred at SX96358845). The work was commissioned by B.G.F. Builders Ltd in compliance with an archaeological condition attached to Planning Consent No. 98/0811/02 granted by Exeter City Council (ECC). Such a requirement is in line with government advice contained in DoE Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (PPG 16).

1.1 Project brief

The work was carried out in accordance with a brief supplied by the ECC Archaeology Officer (Pye 16 October 1998). The main requirements of the brief can be summarised as follows:

- i) the observation of topsoil-stripping;
- ii) the observation of the deeper groundworks for foundations and services where appropriate;
- iii) the excavation and recording of any archaeological remains or deposits;
- iv) post-excavation analysis and reporting.

1.2 The site (Fig. 1)

The site (centred at SX96358845) is a rectangular area of approximately 0.27ha located at the rear of a series of properties fronting High Street at a height of between 5m and 10m AOD. Prior to the development, most of the site comprised a much overgrown orchard.

1.3 Archaeological and historical background

High Street forms part of the line of the Roman road from Exeter to Topsham, where a Roman port is believed to have been located. Prehistoric, Romano-British and medieval remains have recently been found during excavations on land adjacent to Nelson Close immediately to the south-west of the present site at SX96328840 (Sage 1997). Roman material was also recovered to the north-west during the development of Ashford and Retreat Roads in the 1930s. The High Street properties adjacent to the site are probably of late medieval origin.

An archaeological evaluation of the present site was carried out by EA prior to the commencement of building work (Sage 1998) when five trenches were excavated across the early tenement boundaries. The evaluation identified a number of late medieval or post-medieval boundary ditches, but no Roman or earlier features.

2. METHOD

Due to the relatively shallow depth involved, it was agreed that the topsoil-stripping for the house plots would not be archaeologically monitored. However, selective observations were made of the foundation trenches (see 3.1).

Topsoil-stripping for the road linking Peel Close and Orchard Way across the south-western side of the development was archaeologically monitored (see 3.2). All the archaeological features observed during the watching brief lay within this area, centred at SX96338844.

The standard EA recording system was implemented during the project. Stratigraphic information was recorded on single context record sheets, and a drawn record was made at scales of 1:20 or 1:50 as appropriate. A photographic record was made consisting of black-and-white prints and colour transparencies.

Post-excavation work involved the processing, quantification and cataloguing of finds (see Appendix), the compilation of an integrated site archive, and the preparation of a summary fieldwork report (this document).

3. RESULTS

3.1 House foundation trenches

No features were identified in the house foundation trenches.

3.2 Link road corridor (Fig. 2)

Soil-stripping began at the north-western end of the road corridor, using a 360° tracked excavator with a 1.5m grading bucket. Between 0.40m and 0.50m of topsoil/ploughsoil was removed onto orange-brown sand or gravel, into which a number of archaeological features were cut. Other probable features were observed further south-west along the cutting, but it was not possible to examine them.

3.2.1 *Post-medieval boundaries*

Ditch 503

A 1m wide ditch extended NE/SW across the full width of the corridor at the extreme north-western end. This was filled with a stony, medium-brown sandy loam (503) containing one sherd of 17th- or 18th-century pottery. Yellowish-brown sandy clay from a former hedgebank survived along the western side of the ditch. The boundary marked by this ditch and bank is probably that shown dividing plots 74 and 75 on the *c.* 1843 Topsham Tithe Map. Its alignment marks the western boundary of the development site.

Ditch 507

A second NE/SW ditch (507) crossed the corridor 19m further to the south-east. This ditch was 0.90m wide and survived to a depth of 0.25m. It had a rounded profile. The fill of the ditch was a medium brown, loose silty clay loam (508), containing occasional gravel and sandstone fragments and charcoal flecks. The nature of the fill and the alignment of this feature identifies it as a late medieval or post-medieval tenement boundary, probably that dividing plots 76 and 77 on the Tithe Map. It contained six residual sherds of late third- or fourth-century Roman pottery, most likely derived from the Roman feature through which it cut (see below).

3.2.2 *Roman features*

Gully 505

Boundary ditch 503 cut through the northern end of a narrow gully (505), orientated north-south. The southern end of the gully extended into the edge of the road corridor. The gully was between 0.50m and 0.75m wide, and 0.20m deep with a rounded profile. It was filled (506) with medium brown silt loam with occasional small to medium stones, pieces of burnt

stone and burnt clay and charcoal flecks, and contained eight sherds of Roman pottery dating to the second century AD or later.

Possible drying oven (Fig. 3)

A spread of black soil, burnt clay and stone was cleaned and investigated by means of three sections excavated in the locations of proposed drainage trenches.

The eastern half of the area consisted of a roughly oval depression measuring just under 3m long and 2m across at its widest point. The depression was 0.25m deep in the centre, becoming shallower as it narrowed at the eastern end. It was filled with soft, friable, dark greyish-brown or black silty clay (509), with many charcoal and burnt clay flecks. It also contained larger pieces of burnt or fired clay and many fragments of burnt stone (sandstone and volcanic trap) up to 0.25m long (some appeared to be roughly dressed). The fill produced a variety of Roman finds, including a circular copper alloy brooch, provisionally dated to the second century AD, and a number of iron objects. A large number of sherds of late third- or fourth-century pottery were also recovered, including amphorae, samian ware, South Devon ware, and black-burnished coarseware (BB1). A quantity of terracotta roof tiles and a small number of slate tiles were also recovered.

To the west, the depression became a more evident cut (512) filled with red gravelly clay (513) packed around a stone-lined channel or flue (510). The latter was 1.5m long, 0.35m wide and 0.30m deep. The channel was filled with dark grey-brown silty clay (514) containing frequent charcoal flecks, occasional pieces of burnt stone and fragments of hard red burnt clay. At its western end, a sandstone slab appeared to have been laid in the base. The stone lining had been heavily burnt, and there was evidence of some truncation at the eastern end of the structure. A line of hard fired red clay (519) extended along the northern edge of the channel but, since this overlay the fill, it may not have been a component of the structure. The feature appeared to terminate at the edge of the road corridor, but the nature of the watching brief meant that this area was not fully excavated.

The feature could be interpreted as the flue or stokehole of a corn-drier but, in the absence of any grain remains (which may have been missed due to the limitations of the investigation), other functions may be considered, such as the evaporation of brine for salting. The burnt stone and fired clay in the fill of the channel probably derives from the upper part of the structure, which has not survived. Whatever the function of the drying oven, the area to the east probably served as an associated working hollow for raking out etc.

Most of this area had been cut through by the later ditch 507, accounting for the residual Roman material in its fill.

Ditch 515 (Fig. 3)

The west end of the oven cut an earlier NW/SE linear feature (515). This was *c.* 0.30m deep, and at least 0.65m wide, but its western edge lay outside the edge of the road corridor. The feature was filled with a pale-brown silty clay (516) with occasional small stones, patches of red (possibly burnt) clay and flecks of charcoal. It contained Roman pottery, which could not be closely dated.

Feature 517

Another feature (517) was identified to the east of the oven. This was only partially investigated where it lay within the road corridor (Fig. 3). A section was excavated across part of the feature, exposing part of the southern edge and a partial profile. From this limited evidence, it could have been a linear feature with a flattened, splayed profile, or possibly a broader curvilinear depression. The feature was filled with dark grey-brown silty clay (518) with frequent fragments of burnt stone and many red burnt clay and charcoal flecks. The fill contained an iron object, pottery dating from the late third century AD or later, a large amount of terracotta roof tile and a small quantity of slate roof tile. No clear stratigraphic relationship was established between feature 517 and the oven. The fill of 517 appeared to be overlain by material (509) from the eastern half of the oven area, which had been spread by later cultivation.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The main results of the project can be summarised as follows:

- There was evidence of Roman occupation on the site, possibly dating from the second century to the fourth century AD.
- The large quantity of Roman tile and other finds recovered indicates the presence of a nearby building or buildings.
- The stone-lined channel (510) appears to be the remains of a drying oven, perhaps a corn-drier, associated with a working hollow. This whole area may have originally been covered, although no evidence was found for this. The oven structure cut through an earlier linear feature.
- The circular copper alloy brooch found in the hollow is a disc brooch, 30mm in diameter. Its pin (missing) was pivoted on twin lugs and secured by a projecting catch (both surviving). These types of brooches mostly date from the second century AD. They were often set with inlaid glass or enamel (de la Bédoyère 1989, 121), but the decoration is missing from the Topsham example and no traces of enamel or gilt can be identified in its present condition.
- The remains of two late medieval or post-medieval boundary ditches were also identified. These are depicted on the 19th-century Tithe Map, but are undoubtedly earlier in origin.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDIX: FINDS CATALOGUE *by* G. Langman

The following site code was used to mark artefacts: TPC 99.

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Copper Alloy | | | | 506 | Rom (?2C+) | | |
| <i>context</i> | <i>SF</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>comments</i> | | total sherds: 8 | | |
| 509 | 400 | 1 | Roman circular brooch | | total vessels: 5 | | |
| Ironwork | | | | | samian | 1 | 1 |
| <i>context</i> | <i>SF</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>comments</i> | | Rom fw (rough-cast beaker, 2C+) | 4 | 1 |
| 509 | 401 | 1 | ?stud (in 2 fragments) | | SD w | 1 | 1 |
| 509 | 402 | 1 | flat bar | | SW BB1 | 1 | 1 |
| 509 | 403 | 1 | object: ?fixture | | unc ox w (?flagon fb) | 1 | 1 |
| 509 | 404 | 1 | nail | | | | |
| 518 | 405 | 1 | object: ?fixture | 508 | PM [Rom (?L3C/4C) residual] | | |
| Miscellaneous | | | | | total sherds: 6 | | |
| <i>context</i> | <i>qty</i> | | <i>comments</i> | | total vessels: 3 | | |
| 506 | 1 | | fired clay fragment | | SE Dor BB1 (?L3C/4C cp rim) | 4 | 1 |
| 509 | 6 | | fired clay fragments | | SW BB1 | 1 | 1 |
| | | | | | unc cw (Rom) | 1 | 1 |
| Pottery & Dating Evidence | | | | 509 | Rom (4C) | | |
| <i>Abbreviations Listing</i> | | | | | total sherds: 76 | | |
| BB1 | | | black-burnished ware category 1 | | total vessels: 20 | | |
| bs | | | base | | amphora (Dressel 20 typ) | 15 | 2 |
| C | | | Century | | samian | 3 | 3 |
| cp | | | cooking pot | | samian dec | 1 | 1 |
| cw | | | coarseware | | SD w (4C, 1 FB, 2 stg jr) | 5 | 3 |
| dec | | | decorated | | SE Dor BB1 (L3C/4C, 1 cp) | 41 | 3 |
| Dor | | | Dorset | | unc fw | 5 | 3 |
| dsh | | | dish | | unc w (?imp, ?mortaria bs) | 2 | 1 |
| FB | | | flanged bowl | | unc cw (gty mic w) | 1 | 1 |
| fb | | | fabric | | unc cw (ox fb) | 3 | 3 |
| fw | | | fineware | | tile: L3C+ | | |
| gty | | | gritty | 513 | L3C+ | | |
| imp | | | import | | tile: L3C+ | | |
| jr | | | jar | | | | |
| L | | | late | 516 | Rom | | |
| M | | | Middle | | total sherds: 2 | | |
| mic | | | micaceous | | total vessels: 2 | | |
| ox | | | oxidised | | unc ox w (?samian, small worn sherds) | 1 | 1 |
| PRD | | | plain rim dish | | unc cw (Rom) | 1 | 1 |
| Rom | | | Roman | | | | |
| SD | | | South Devon | 518 | Rom (L3C+) | | |
| SE | | | South East | | total sherds: 12 | | |
| SS | | | South Somerset type | | total vessels: 6 | | |
| stg | | | storage | | SD w (M2C+) | 6 | 1 |
| SW | | | South-Western | | SE Dor BB1 (L3C+, 1 cp, 1 FB, 1 PRD) | 4 | 3 |
| typ | | | type | | unc cw | 1 | 1 |
| unc | | | unclassified | | unc w (?flagon fb) | 1 | 1 |
| w | | | ware | | tile: L3C+ | | |
| <i>context</i> | <i>contents/dating evidence</i> | <i>sherds</i> | <i>vessels</i> | | | | |
| 502 | Rom | | | 519 | Rom | | |
| | total sherds: 8 | | | | tile: Rom | | |
| | total vessels: 2 | | | | | | |
| | amphora (Dressel 20 typ) | 4 | 1 | | | | |
| | SE Dor BB1 | 4 | 1 | | | | |
| 503 | 17C/18C | | | | <i>Statistics</i> | | |
| | total sherds: 1 | | | | total number of sherds: 113 | | |
| | total vessels: 1 | | | | minimum number of vessels: 39 | | |
| | SS cw (17C/18C, dsh) | 1 | 1 | | Slate | | |
| | | | | | <i>context</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>comments</i> |
| | | | | | 509 | 2 | Roman roof fragments |

518 3 Roman roof fragments

Small Finds

| <i>SF</i> | <i>context</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>material</i> | <i>comments</i> |
|-----------|----------------|------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 400 | 509 | 1 | Cu alloy | Roman brooch |
| 401 | 509 | 1 | Fe | ?stud (in 2 fragments) |
| 402 | 509 | 1 | Fe | flat bar |
| 403 | 509 | 1 | Fe | object: ?fixture |
| 404 | 509 | 1 | Fe | nail |
| 405 | 518 | 1 | Fe | object: ?fixture |

Stone

| <i>context</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>comments</i> |
|----------------|------------|------------------------|
| 509 | 1 | volcanic trap fragment |
| 518 | 1 | volcanic trap fragment |

Tile

| <i>context</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>weight</i> | <i>comments</i> |
|----------------|------------|---------------|--|
| 502 | 1 | 308 | Roman tile (discarded) |
| 509 | 12 | 2858 | Roman tile (discarded): late 3rd century or later |

| | | | |
|-----|----|------|--|
| 513 | 1 | 110 | Roman tile (discarded): late 3rd century or later |
| 518 | 15 | 2384 | Roman tile (discarded): late 3rd century or later |
| 519 | 1 | 398 | Roman tile (discarded) |

Roman tile data

| <i>context</i> | <i>fabric</i> | <i>type</i> | <i>qty</i> | <i>weight</i> |
|----------------|---------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| 502 | 2 | teg | 1 | 502 |
| 509 | 1 | flat | 6 | 1096 |
| 509 | 1 | teg | 2 | 218 |
| 509 | 2 | flat | 1 | 200 |
| 509 | 2 | teg | 3 | 686 |
| 509 | 4 | imb | 5 | 406 |
| 509 | 4 | teg | 4 | 252 |
| 513 | 4 | imb | 1 | 110 |
| 518 | 1 | flat | 4 | 780 |
| 518 | 1 | teg | 3 | 602 |
| 518 | 2 | flat | 5 | 716 |
| 518 | 4 | imb | 3 | 286 |
| 519 | 1 | flat | 1 | 398 |

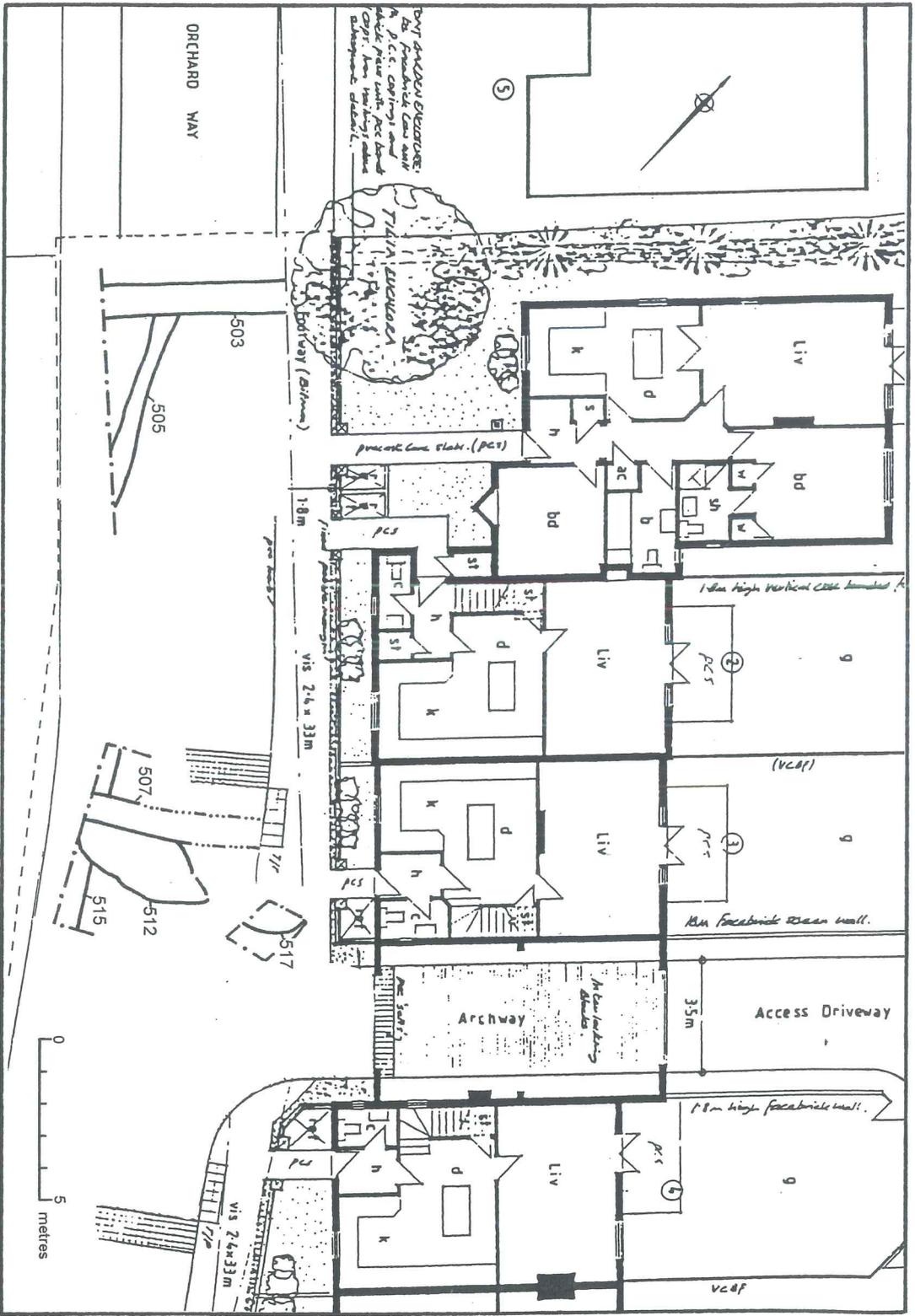


Fig. 2 Site plan (provided by B.G.F. Builders Ltd) showing archaeological features identified within the road corridor.

Fig. 3 Plan and sections of drying oven.

