

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS AT POUNDBURY FARM TRACK,
FORDINGTON, DORCHESTER, DORSET

33542

W371

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Trust for Wessex Archaeology

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Introduction

The Trust for Wessex Archaeology was commissioned by the Duchy of Cornwall to undertake a watching-brief at Poundbury Farm, Fordington, Dorchester, during the construction of a farm track in May 1990. The new track runs from the Bridport Road (SY66429040) northwards, downslope, to join an existing track just west of the A37 (SY66659082) in Fordington Bottom. At the time of construction the land was under pasture, and the work involved the mechanical removal of topsoil, and levelling, to a depth of approximately 0.2m.

Archaeological Background

The site is situated just over two kilometres to the west of the Roman town of Dorchester, Durnovaria, in an area rich in archaeological remains. Aerial photographs indicate substantial areas of later prehistoric field systems and enclosures, some still surviving as earthworks, and recent excavations along the route of the Southern Dorchester By-pass and the Western Link Road (the A37) have demonstrated the presence of numerous settlements and cemeteries of Bronze Age to Roman and later date. Generally these settlement and other remains only survive as features cut into the chalk or clay bedrock, but in Fordington Bottom in particular, the Western Link excavations showed that some sites lie sealed and protected under deep layers of colluvium, and the archaeological remains are better preserved.

The other major archaeological feature in the immediate vicinity is the Roman aqueduct, which brought water to the Roman town from a source somewhere near Maiden Newton, following the contours over a distance in excess of 11km. The

aqueduct is probably the best example in Britain, and is particularly well-preserved in Fordington Bottom where the channel is still open, nearly at its original dimensions, 2m wide and 1m deep.

Methodology and Results

The track was designed to be 10ft (3m) wide, with a 4ft (1.2m) strip either side to allow passage of wide machinery. Only the central, 10-ft width was stripped of topsoil to a depth of 0.2m, using a tracked excavator with ditching bucket. Subsequently hard core was brought in to form the actual track. Spoil was dumped to one or both sides to level the track as required. The archaeological watching-brief was carried out during this stripping, spoil being examined for finds, while any features cut into subsoil were plotted. Almost all finds from the topsoil, apart from a few flint flakes, were modern and were not retained. Other artefacts from hand-cleaning of features were retained and are noted below. Generally only the presence and position of archaeological features was recorded and they were not further investigated other than surface cleaning, as they would be buried and preserved under the hard core of the track. Some features at the north end of the track were, however, examined in more detail (below).

For the greater length of the track the base was a silty clay with occasional patches of clay-with-flints; chalk bedrock was observed only in parts of the northern half. The topsoil consisted of light greyish-brown silty loam (0.15m), over a similar depth of heavier, yellowish-brown silty clay loam subsoil, which contained occasional flint flakes.

Archaeological Features

A. 123m north of the Bridport Road end of the track, a ridge of badly-weathered chalk, 2m long and 0.45m wide was noted, aligned approximately north-south along the contours of the slope. No datable artefacts were found. The feature is most likely to be the remnants of a lynchet or field boundary, probably of later prehistoric or Roman date.

B. Another lynchet, probably of similar date, was noted some 26m south of the north end of the track, running east-west across the slope of the ground.

C. At the northern end of the track, at the lowest point adjacent to the existing trackway and fence, and extending southwards to the lynchet noted above, was a substantial build-up of chalk-flecked colluvium, under a very shallow topsoil (0.1m). The whole area was cleaned by hand and a quantity of Roman pottery, animal bone and a fine, small, Roman copper alloy penannular brooch were found (Figure 1). A small number of features, initially thought to be graves, was observed to cut the colluvium. However, subsequent more detailed excavation and examination revealed two rectangular chalk-filled pits or footings, both aligned north-south and some 1.5m apart. One was 0.6m deep, the other (to the east) was 0.35m deep; both were 0.5m wide and 1m long. These 'pits' were filled with chalk blocks and large flint nodules, and one produced a sherd of coarse Roman pottery in locally-produced Black Burnished ware. The function of these two features is uncertain, but the most likely explanation is that they are part of a set of footings for a Roman building.

Three other features were also noted in this area, one curvilinear, chalk-filled gully, possibly again a building footing; one small sub-square, chalk-filled pit or post-pad; and one post-hole. None of these features is dated by artefacts, but the first two at least are possibly of Roman date.

All the features were cut into the colluvial deposit which had accumulated at the base of the slope. This pre-Roman deposit is presumably at least in part the result of arable activity in the later prehistoric period enhancing soil movement downslope. The colluvium, a yellow-brown silty clay layer, was excavated by machine, and shown to be 0.5m deep. Below this was a dark brown silty clay layer with large flint

nodules, 0.3m deep, over poor quality weathered chalk with natural flint nodules.

The Finds

All the finds, apart from very late post-medieval and modern material from the topsoil, are of Roman date. Some 50 fragments of pottery were found, mostly during the manual cleaning around features cut into the colluvium at the north end of the track. Of these fragments, 48 were coarse Black Burnished ware (made in the Poole Harbour area), and represent a common range of forms: cooking pots, storage jars, dishes and bowls. Most appear to be of 2nd-/3rd-century date. The other two fragments of pottery are from two fineware vessels, one a bag-shaped or globular beaker with a dark reddish-brown colour-coat, dating to the earlier 2nd century; the other of unattributable form.

Other Roman finds included one piece of shale, probably from a dish or platter; one iron nail or wire fragment, one copper alloy brooch and 11 fragments of animal bone. The last were mostly from sheep, with one probable pig bone and one possible domestic fowl bone.

The copper alloy brooch is of a very fine, small penannular form, with recurved terminals. It has a plain, flattened back, but the front is decorated with delicate v-shaped notches along the spine. It appears to be gilded. It is possible that the brooch is a zoomorphic type, the terminals representing animal heads. It is probably of 2nd-/3rd-century AD date, but these brooches are uncommon, and notoriously difficult to date accurately.

Summary

The presence of lynchets or field boundary remnants is entirely in keeping with the known history of the area, as is the occurrence of probable settlement features of Roman date in the valley bottom. The relatively low number of finds might suggest that this Roman activity was on the periphery of the

main settlement area, but the limited area available for examination precludes a definite conclusion. Some of the finds, though low in number, are unusual (the penannular brooch, the shale vessel fragment and the colour-coated beaker fragment), and indicate a settlement probably of some wealth, particularly when the results from the adjacent Western Link sites are also taken into account.

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