An Archaeological Watching Brief at Manor farm, Medbourne, Leicestershire SK 798 930

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Summary

In September 1997, a watching brief was undertaken by ULAS on behalf of Mr van Oppen on the excavation of foundation trenches for a new dwelling at Manor Farm, Medbourne. The site lay in the Roman small town of Medbourne, 300m north-east of the Leicester-Godmanchester Roman road. Observations were made of a stone lined flat-bottomed, straight sided channel cut, (1.20m wide by 0.30m deep, by at least 5.50m long) on a north-west / south-east alignment. The stones were heat scorched and the channel was filled with charcoal and burnt debris. The base of the cut was lined with inverted Roman roof tiles (tegula), laid horizontally to form a flat floor to the cut. It was noted that in the eastern end of the channel a number of charred logs were preserved.

Although somewhat longer than the 3m average, it is possible that this feature represents the flue section of a Roman oven or kiln, with a flat base to facilitate easy raking out and a stoke hole at the eastern end. However, analysis of samples of the fill produced neither kiln waste material or an abundance of charred cereal grains. The proximity of a Roman villa immediately to the south of the site also suggests the possibility that this feature may have been part of a larger system, perhaps even part of a hypocaust, supplying the villa.

Introduction

From the 25 - 29th September, 1997 an archaeological watching brief was undertaken by University of Leicester Archaeological Services at Manor Farm, Medbourne in advance of the development of a residential dwelling (fig.1 site location plan). The site lies in the Roman small town of Medbourne, 300m north of the Roman road from Leicester to Godmanchester. Foundation trenches were to be machine excavated under archaeological supervision, with access to record any archaeological features.

Observations made in the sides of the machine cut trenches suggested that part of a kiln or oven had survived immediately below the modern ground surface. Fragments of pot and tile recovered from the fill of the feature suggested that it may have been Roman in origin. Two circular pit cuts were also noted, cutting through the 'kiln' feature.

A 'window' in the development programme, whilst the footings of the building were being erected, allowed for the further investigation of the archaeological findings. The 'kiln' feature was uncovered in plan and a sample area excavated. It was hoped that this would allow for a more comprehensive interpretation of the form and extent of the archaeological remains and suggest the probable nature of any past activity.

Results

A flat bottomed, straight sided channel cut, 1.20m wide by 0.30m deep, on a north-west / south-east alignment, was observed over a length of 5.50m across the central portion of the development area (fig. 2 plan of features). The channel was cut into the natural yellow boulder clay. Both ends and a large proportion of the central area of the channel had been truncated by the foundation trenches, although a continuation of the channel could not be seen in the outer section faces of the development area. Along both sides the channel had been lined with a single width of ironstone blocks, laid on-edge (up to 0.40 x 0.20 x 0.10m). In a single section the lining was observed to a height of three courses, although generally only a single course survived. Five faces of each stone had been roughly dressed to produce a rectangular block, with the outside edge left rough. The ironstone blocks appeared to be

packed with or pressed into the surrounding clay, to form a rough bonding to the stone. The internal width of the lined channel was approximately 0.80m wide. The base of the channel was generally flat or gently curving and was not lined.

The internal face of the stone lining, the clay packing and the base of the cut had all been scorched red. Along the southern edge of the cut the scorching had penetrated into the surrounding clay natural by some 0.60 - 0.80m.

The western portion of the channel was filled with a dark grey/black silt clay with inclusions of tile, charcoal, bone and lenses of clay.

Towards the eastern end of the channel (the most easterly 1.60m observed) the cut was filled with a series of lenses of charcoal interleaved with mixed lenses of crushed tile, charcoal, ash, mortar and clayey silt. In total these lenses were some 0.15m deep. A 10kg soil sample was retained for further analysis (see below). Lying on this bed of burnt material was a layer of Roman roof tiles (*tegula*), all laid upside down with the flange of the tile facing down. The tiles, although slightly disturbed, appeared to have been deliberately laid as a continuous bed across the floor of the channel. The upper surface of the tiles would have been flat. Above the tile layer was a build up of charcoal and ash, with some large fragments of carbonised wood surviving. These 'logs' were laid flat along the length of the channel. Samples of the wood were retained for species identification.

Truncating the southern half of the channel was a roughly circular cut with a 1.0m diameter. This was filled with a friable yellow-grey silt clay mixed with occasional small pebbles and flecks of mortar. This feature was not excavated.

Towards the centre of the channel cut there was a second circular cut. This was largely removed by the machine excavated trench but could be seen to have a 0.80m diameter, was straight sided and at least 1.0m deep. It contained a loose fill of purplish-brown clay silt with frequent flecks of mortar, charcoal and fragments of Roman tile. Roman pot fragments from two vessels were also recovered from this feature.

- A colour-coated ware wide-mouthed jar / bowl form (Howe et al 1980) dating from the late third to early fourth century.
- A possible East Midlands burnished ware jar / bowl of a possible fourth century date.

Environmental analysis

One 2.5 litre sample was processed by wet sieving with flotation which produced 15mls. of flotation fraction which was examined for plant remains. It produced only one charred fat-hen seed (*Chenopodium sp.*), one charred spike-rush seed *(Eleocharis sp.*), a fragment of cereal grain and abundant fragments of charcoal. Therefore there was no evidence from the plant remains to suggest the final use of the feature. However, ovens and kilns used in the processing of cereals are common in the Roman period and if cleaned out after the final use, or subsequently used for an alternative purpose, evidence may not have survived. It may simply have been a domestic or industrial structure deliberately heated for an entirely different purpose, such as heating water, which would leave no environmental remains.

Discussion

The presence of a stone lined channel, an area with a concentration of charcoal, ash and carbonised wood and the scorched red internal face of the channel suggests that heat was being both produced and conducted within this structure. The eastern end of the structure would appear to be the remains of a stoke-hole, with the stone lined channel being some form of extended, horizontal flue. The addition of a tiled floor to the stoke hole end of the structure, after a period of use, may suggest that the fire was regularly raked out.

A more comprehensive excavation of the feature may help to interpret any activity. The presence of seeds in any quantity may suggest that this heating system may have been used as a drying oven for crops (wheat, barley, oats and corn have all been found in ovens from Roman sites). However, these dryers have, on occasion, been found to be indistinguishable in form from pottery kilns used to dry pottery to a leather-hard state before firing (Young 1972 209, 1977, 20). Hot air may have been directed through a drying chamber for smoking meat and fish or it has also been suggested that heat was produced as smoking rooms for seasoning timber (Hanson 1978 296). It is also conceivable that the section of heated channel observed was part of a *hypocaust,* a system of hot air from a furnace circulating beneath a building - the Roman equivalent of central heating. The Roman villa immediately south of the site (SMR ref. 79SE-A) may even have been the beneficiary of this system.

The presence of two circular pit features containing late Roman pottery cutting into the heated channel suggests that the channel went out of use within the Roman period. The pits may have been rubbish pits, suggesting a domestic dwelling in the vicinity.

Archive

All records and finds have been given the accession number XA20 1997

The archive consists of :

site notebook

3 section drawing

2 plan drawings

1 monochrome film

1 colour film

1 box of pottery

1 box of Roman tile

1 10kg soil sample

Bibliography

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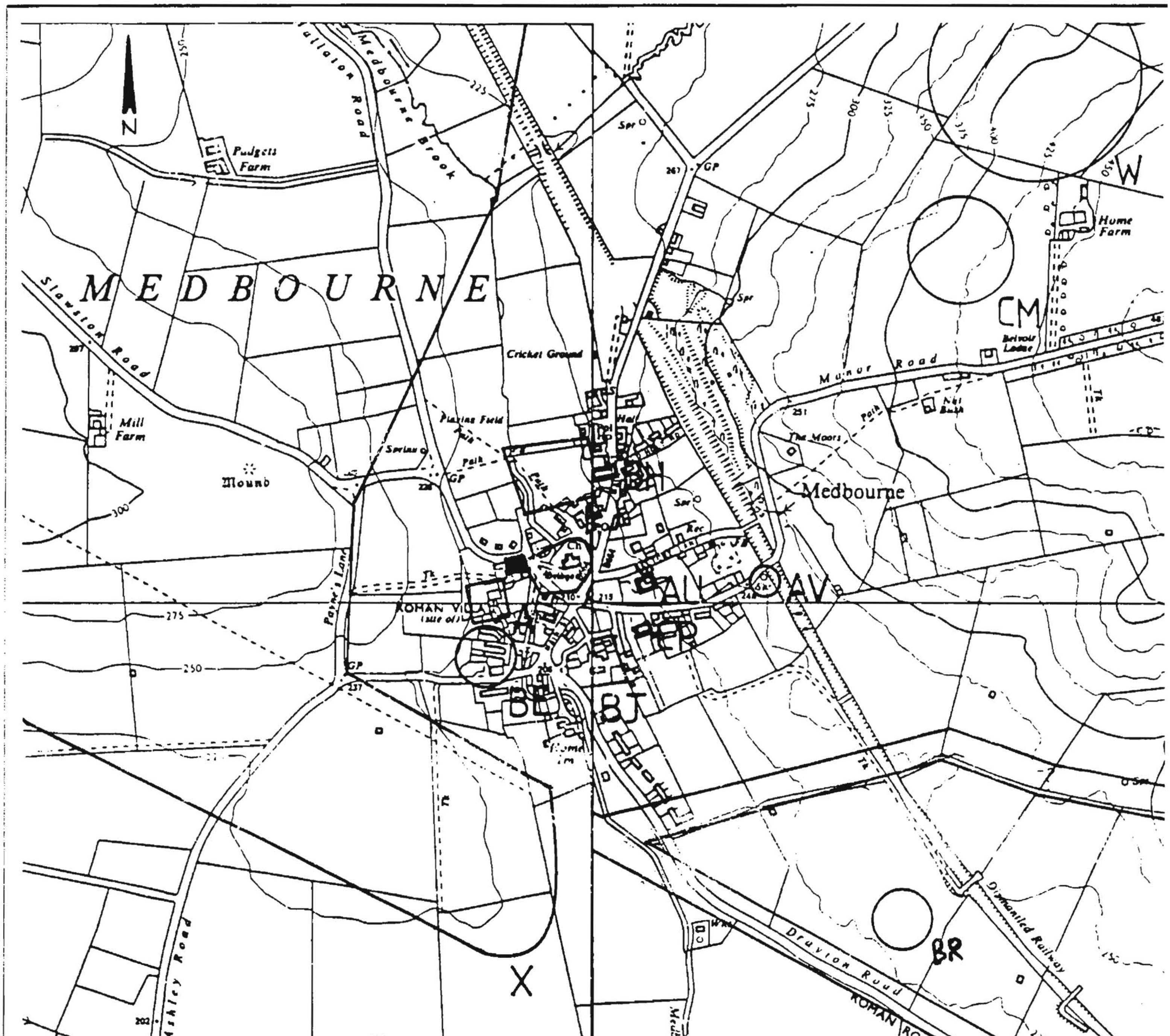
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Medbourne
Pudgets Farm
Mill Farm
Mound
Slawston Road
Hallaton Road
Medbourne Brook
Cricket Ground
Playing Field
Path
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Spr
Payne's Lane
ROMAN VILLA
Ch
Manor Road
Belvoir Lodge
Hume Farm
The Moors
Drayton Road
ROMAN ROAD
Dismantled Railway
Ashley Road
Ford
Brookfield House Farm
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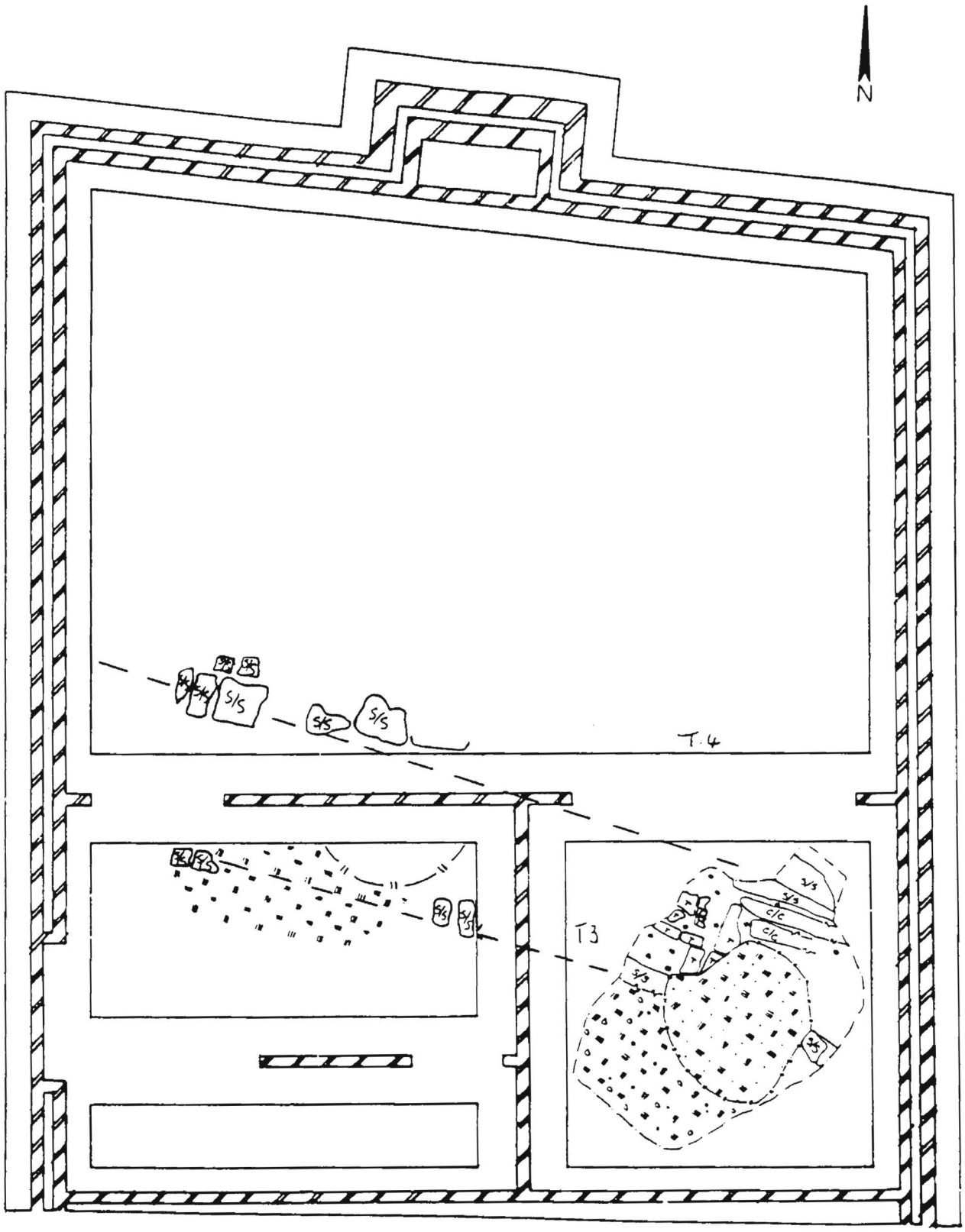

silt
clay
sandstone
sandstone pebbles
charcoal
charcoal
tile
cutting feature
limit of excavation
proposed line of channel
5M

Figure 2 Composite plan of excavated features.