

# NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF  
DURING WATER MAIN RENEWALS IN THE  
LAXTON AREA, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  
JUNE 1999

No RN given  
yet as needs  
more looking at.

**NORTHAMPTONSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL  
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGY**

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SEPTEMBER 1998-MARCH 1999**

*Abstract*

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out whilst a new water main was being laid in the Laxton area of Northamptonshire. The watching brief revealed further information on Roman settlement at Laxton including its important iron working complex. The line of the water main was altered at one location to avoid damage to one of the large Roman furnace structures where a separate excavation subsequently took place.*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Mr D Jackson on behalf of Northamptonshire Archaeological between September 1998 and March 1999 during trenching for a new water main between Duddington and Blatherwyche, Northamptonshire. Much of the trenching was carried out along the verge of the A43 trunk road (Fig 1: NGR SP 966 965 to SP 976 994).
- 1.2 The work was undertaken at the request of Northamptonshire Heritage since the route of the pipeline crossed an area known for early ironworking including going the partly excavated Roman settlement in Laxton parish (Jackson 1979, Jackson and Ambrose 1978, and Jackson and Tylcote 1988).

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The A43 road improvements in 1985 resulted in archaeological excavations along 250m of the road corridor which effected the Roman settlement (Fig 2). The remains of an iron working area with many furnaces and slag debris, together with stone buildings and associated burial ground were uncovered (Fig 2; Jackson and Tylcote 1988). The cemetery may have been fairly large as further burials were said to have been found in the building of the bungalow, 40m to the west of the road corridor (Fig 2).

- 2.2 As the new water main was planned to go through this complex the principal aim of the watching brief was to record further evidence of this site.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

- 3.1 The contractors, Pipeline Construction Ltd, used three different methods of trenching or laying the new pipework depending on the ground conditions:-

- 1) Where trenching cut through old road surfaces, a trencher-excavator was used cutting trenches only 300mm wide.
- 2) Where trenching cut through a grassed roadside verge a JCB excavator was used.
- 3) Where the bedrock was soft, directional drilling was used and no trenching was carried out.

- 3.2 The work took place intermittently over a six month period and only short lengths of trench were open at any one time. A total of eleven visits were made to observe the trenching or other work.

### **4. THE RESULTS**

- 4.1 It was not possible to observe the trenching at all times but it appears that much of the trench along the verge of the modern A43 was cut through disturbed ground. It is clear that the existing road had been straightened or widened over time.
- 4.2 Outside the area of Laxton Roman settlement no slag or burning was noted in the trench sides or upcast, and none was seen by the workmen carrying out the trenching. This limited observation was undertaken during the trenching between Bulwick and Blatherwycke, between the A43 and Blatherwycke, and between the A43 and Laxton.

4.3 In the area of the settlement, the planned alignment of the trench suggested it was likely to bisect a row of nationally important, large Roman iron smelting furnaces exposed during roadworks in 1985 (Fig 2). With the assistance of Anglia Water Services Ltd, it was subsequently confirmed that a large furnace was sited on the line of the trench. Later, it was decided to move the trench for the new water along the west side of the A43 following the line of the old road, left as an access road after the roadworks in 1985 (Fig 1 and 2).

4.4 The new trench route through the site was closely watched and this took several days to complete because of mechanical breakdowns. The narrowness of the trench (300mm wide and 1.1m below the road surface) largely prevented the cleaning and examination of the sides of the trench. Despite this the following observations were made during trenching in this section:-

1) The cemetery area. No burials was seen in the water main trench. There was a deep deposit of hardcore below the road surface, and it seems the old road had been widened at some stage.

2) The settlement and ironworking area. None of these upper layers had survived beneath the roadway make-up.

3) The furnace alignment. A disturbance was noted, roughly on the line of the row of furnaces. No burning was exposed however and its function is unclear.

4) Slag in the valley bottom. A dense deposit of slag and furnace debris extended from the north side of the entrance road from the A43, to a point where it was sealed by colluvium in the valley bottom. The deposit would have been at least 1m thick and it is significant that it is extensive at this point as it was below the line of the new road laid in 1985.

5) Roman pits? A layer of dark soil containing Roman pottery, extending to the bottom of the trench, was revealed on the north side of the valley. It was 15m-20m wide and may have extended beneath the colluvium in the valley bottom.

- 4.5 A separate research excavation was organised on one of the furnaces. The work was directed by Mr Peter Crew with help from Northamptonshire Archaeological Society and the Middle Nene Archaeological Society. The objectives were to obtain a plan of the furnace and collect a range of samples for subsequent scientific analysis. After the excavation the furnace structure was backfilled with pea gravel and not destroyed.

## 5. Finds

### 5.1 Roman Pottery

Whilst cutting through the pitted area on the north side of the valley, a certain amount of Roman pottery was observed on the conveyor belt transporting the soil between the excavator and the lorry. It was not possible to save a meaningful assemblage but the following types were noted: Grey wares, Shell gritted storage jars, Channel-rim jars, Mortaria and Samian. No Colour coated wares were seen and the pottery may date principally to the earlier Roman period.

### 5.2 Tiles

Some pieces of shell gritted tile were noted on the conveyor belt.

### 5.3 Iron slag

A selection of iron slag was recovered from the trench sides and was sent for analysis by Peter Crew, Chief Archaeologist for Snowdonia National Park.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The watching brief has shown that the area of iron working and occupation is larger than previously recorded with the slag deposit and pits extending at least 20m to the west. The depth of the deposits implies that this substantial activity continues further to the north-west and west of the water trench.

- 6.2 The possible continuation westwards of the cemetery to the site of the bungalow west of the A43 road could not be proven due to recent disturbance associated with the road.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Anglia Water Services Ltd and their area manager, Mr John Vevar, were extremely helpful during the course of the watching brief and the excavation of the furnace. In particular, they removed top soil in advance of the excavation and also backfilled the trench after the work was completed. In addition Anglia Water paid for the expenses incurred both during the excavation and those resulted from post excavation analysis.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig 1 Line of new water main at 1:10000  
Fig 2 Area of iron working at 1:1000

Project Manager:	Steve Parry MA MIFA
Fieldwork:	Dennis Jackson
Text:	Dennis Jackson
Illustration:	Rob Atkins BSocSc DipArch

Northamptonshire Archaeology  
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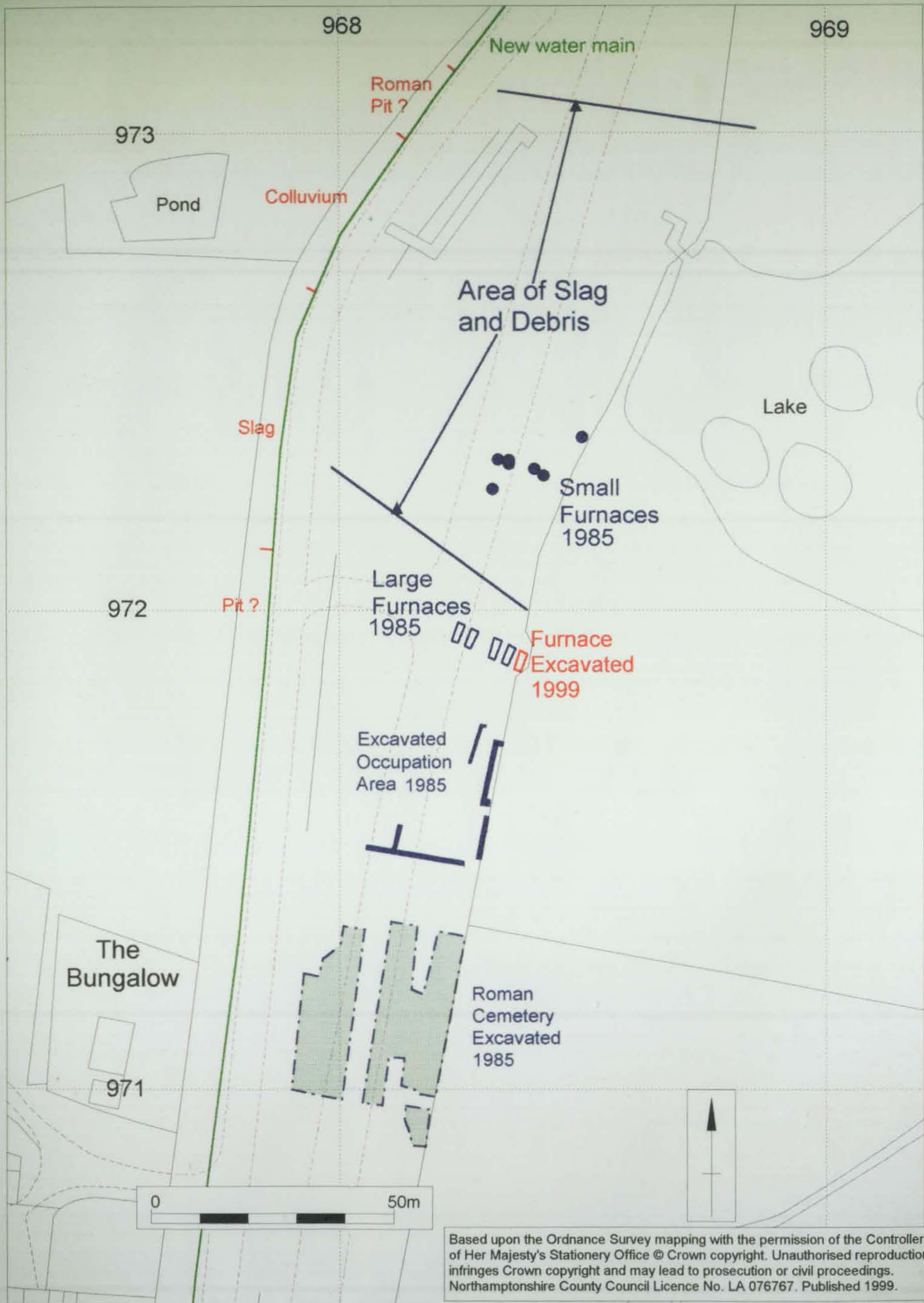




Fig 1

Scale 1:10000





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Fig 2



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**Northamptonshire  
County Council**  
Environment Directorate

Northamptonshire Archaeology  
2 Bolton House  
Wootton Hall Park  
Northampton NN4 8BE

Tel: 01604 700493/4  
Fax: 01604 702822

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