INTERIM SUMMARY OF THE EXCAVATIONS CONDUCTED ON THE LAND EAST OF BLACO HILL, MATTERSEY

June-September 1996

PREPARED FOR TARMAC QUARRY PRODUCTS (EASTERN) LTD

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Authors: Tony Morris and Daryl Garton

University Park
Nottingham NG7 2RD.
0115 951 4823
Fax 0115 951 4824

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INTRODUCTION

This summary describes the archaeological work undertaken in the summer of 1996 as part of the Scheme of Treatment prior to quarrying operations on land east of Blaco Hill, Mattersey, for Tarmac Quarry Products (Eastern) Ltd. It comprises those sites intended for detailed excavation (as defined in the Scheme of Treatment) in Phase 1A of the quarry programme. The sites were given Area numbers in the Scheme of Treatment (referred to here), but the excavated trench and context numbers run on from the evaluation excavations, hence starting at trench 33 in this summary. The full report on the phase 1 works will be prepared along with those areas recorded by 'rapid excavation', watching brief and section recording in due course.

Figure 1 shows the location and size of the trenches excavated between June and September 1996 against the cropmark plan. Trenches 33, 35, 37, 39 and 40 were all examined in detail in the following manner: they were topsoil stripped by JCB using a toothless 1.5m wide ditching bucket and hand cleaned using shovel and trowel to reveal archaeological features which were excavated as appropriate. Trenches 34 and 36 were excavated by JCB to 1.2m depth. Trenches 38 and 41 were topsoil stripped by JCB to expose the subsoil surface.

TRENCH SUMMARIES

Trench 33

This 20 x 20m area was excavated across the roughly semi-circular cropmark at the southern end of Area 21. No corresponding features were identified. The area was extended to the north-east and south-west (10 x 3m trenches, opposite each other, along the central axis), to fully confirm the absence of this cropmark feature. The basal clay layer sits very nearly directly below the ploughsoil here. Thin expanses of sand cover its surface, which is undulating, partly churned and disrupted by shallow channels. Cut across both these deposits are the remains of other channels filled with a flood derived silt. In section this is seen to lie below a thin layer of peat. This area has therefore produced a useful stratigraphic sequence, and samples for dating and analysis, but no cultural archaeology.

Trench 34

A 10 x 3m trench was machine excavated to 1.2m to test for the presence of the more southerly of the two small cropmarks that made up the Area 21 group. No archaeological features were identified. This trench, along with a 5 x 3m, 1.2m deep machine dug slot in the northern corner of trench 33, confirmed the general geoarchaeological stratigraphy of the area. Above the gravel is a thickness of sand. This is covered by a highly plastic and generally sterile clay layer. Mixed sands fill shallow channels and form a covering layer that thickens to the south-west. The furthest south and west that the clay has been noted is at the junction of cropmark features II and VI. The silt is unique to this north-westernmost excavation and the peat is part of a series of blankets peats that probably date from at least the late-Roman period to modern times.

Trench 35
A 25 x 15m trench was opened to reveal the junction between cropmarks I and VI. This was extended to the south-east and along the edge of the modern drainage ditch to fully expose the features. Cropmark VI, the north-south field system ditch, joins Cropmark I, the east-west field-system ditch in a westward curve. The basal ditch fills interleaved and mingled confirming that the two features were contemporary. Some metres to the south, a localised re-cut of the north-south ditch was seen as a butt end, marking the creation of an entrance within the field-system. Just north of the junction was a recut of the east-west ditch. This too was highly localised (3 to 4m), probably ending before the modern drainage ditch section. It contained blocks of highly organic material, interpreted as topsoil sods or turves, that appeared to have fallen or been pushed back in from the south side. A number of small gulleys were identified. One of these was clearly earlier than the east-west ditch and another later than the north-south ditch. Spreads of grey-brown sandy loam, very similar to the upper ditch fills survived below the modern topsoil; these were interpreted as the basal relict soil of the field-system. Samples from both sandy and peaty deposits were taken for dating and palaeoenvironmental analysis.

Trench 36
This machine box was excavated to give a reference section for the east-west ditch (Cropmark I) and to examine the sands and clays below, particularly the organic material at the base of the clay deposit for which a preliminary interpretation is the plant debris at a lake margin.

Trench 37
A 26m long trench was placed along the line of the east-west ditch (Cropmark I) to the east of trench 35, to further examine its form. The presence of a shallow shelf along the south edge was confirmed, apparently an early phase perhaps cut from a higher ground level. The deeper recut along the north side was filled with organic silt at the base and peat at the top. It was dug in sections with baulks left in the base. These may have acted as both buttresses to reduce flow and storm water traps. The ditches also seem to have been cut through peaty material. Samples from both silty and peaty deposits were taken for dating and palaeoenvironmental analysis.

Trench 38
This 3m wide trench was opened along the east side of the modern field system ditch to confirm that no ditch continued to the north of Cropmark I.

Trench 39
In the north-western corner of Area 4, Cropmark I intersects with a sinuous north-south cropmark interpreted from its plan form as a relict water channel. This trench (23x16m) across the intersection, demonstrated that the channel cut the east-west field-system ditch and was filled with alluvium. The channel was recent as it cut across a feature containing cinder of probable Post-Medieval date. The ditch was cut through sand and into clay at the base. It had clay lumps in the primary fill that may have fallen back in from upcast spoil along its southern edge. The main fill was a sandy loam. No samples were taken for analysis.

Trench 40

The intersection of Cropmarks II and VI proved unexpectedly informative, elucidating pieces of excavation evidence from trenches elsewhere on the site, and helping to form a better picture of the field system and its function. In trench 40 (22x19m) the ditches were both contemporary and continuous, filled with a sandy loam. This basal fill included a mix of clay lumps/fragments. Careful excavation exposed a myriad of tool marks cut into the clayey base of the ditch. A latex mould was made of the best preserved. Both the northern and southern parts of the Cropmark VI ditch curved westward to meet the junction. The western arm of the Cropmark II ditch deepened to meet the junction. The eastern arm was raised to a slightly higher level. With drainage of storm water from the hill to the west, this system would act as a water and sediment trap, funnelling flow into the ditches to the north and south and letting overflow out to the east. The dry, sandy ditch fills were not appropriate for further analysis.

Trench 41

A concentration of brick or tile was reported by one of the farm's employees to the south-east of trench 35. Topsoil stripping of a 1.5m wide trench revealed no evidence of archaeological features.

COMMENT

These excavations have investigated some of the detail of field-systems previously only known from cropmarks. Water management appears to have been a concern in this wet floodplain since cropmark ditch I was dug with baulks which would have provided storm water traps and acted as a water flow control within the ditch. The continuing watching brief will address this question by recording as complete a length of the ditch as possible to determine the full extent and periodicity of these structures. Similar structures will be looked for in cropmark ditches II and III. The samples taken for palaeoenvironmental analysis will allow issues such as the use of the fields to be addressed, for example whether livestock and/or arable agriculture was conducted nearby. Both issues have a wider significance, since these field-systems are linked in both layout and orientation to the wider landscape known through aerial photography, the Brickwork plan field-systems of Romano-British date.

As yet, the area to the north of cropmark ditch I appears not to have been divided into fields; however, the clay horizon is close to the surface, hence it is unlikely that cropmarks would develop. The watching brief will provide an opportunity to establish whether this was the northern limit of fields, and by implication cultivation, in the Roman period.

The inundation of the river valley by the later Roman period, and the build up of flood deposits by the medieval period, are also questions which will be addressed from the samples taken. Any well preserved sequences of deposits observed during the watching brief will be sampled to further this analysis.

There will also be a contribution to the palaoegeography of the late glacial period, through the recording of the location, depths and analysis of the clay horizon. Some information has been gained from these excavations, but the watching brief will give us an opportunity to observe more extensive sections which we can link with those in other locations within the

Idle Valley.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Trust is grateful to Neil Beards of Tarmac Quarry Products (Eastern) Ltd for commissioning the work as part of the archaeological Scheme of Treatment for the site and arranging access to the site in advance of Tarmac formally taking over the land, and to Alistair Lee, the landowner, for his generous help, particularly with the arrangements for the water bowser. The fieldwork was supervised by Tony Morris with assistance from Doug Gilbert; the surveying and environmental aspects were supervised by Andy Howard, with the project designed and managed by Daryl Garton. The field team comprised Martin Ashton, Paul Caldwell, Paul Davies, Adrian Turner, Dave Walker and Caroline Wickham. Jane Goddard and Caroline Wickham drew Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Location of excavation trenches 33-41 and the cropmarks. Scale 1:10,000.