

An Interim Report on excavations at the Wolf development site, Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet, Somerset, Summer 2004

Introduction

Archaeological excavations were undertaken on a proposed retail development site at Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet during June, July and August 2004. These were in response to a condition attached to a planning permission granted by Mendip District Council (App. No. 067047/013) to Blackfriars Developments Ltd (Basingstoke). A Specification for the required archaeological response was prepared by Somerset County Council, and the work was commissioned by Blackfriars from archaeological contractors C. and N. Hollinrake in association with archaeological consultant Peter Leach.

The Site

The development site is located at NGR ST 362142 on the west side of Fosse Lane, Charlton, now an eastern suburb of Shepton Mallet (Fig. 1). Formerly a pasture field, the plot has been vacant for some years, much of its topsoil having been removed. In 1991 an archaeological evaluation by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit demonstrated the presence of extensive structural remains and finds of Roman date. These are interpreted as part of a much more extensive Romano-British settlement, whose former presence and character has been established over recent years in the course of surveys and similar responses to previous developments nearby. This settlement was established in the late 1st century AD alongside a major Roman road – the Foss Way – and flourished through to the 5th century and possibly later.

Method

The excavation strategy was conditioned by development specifications for the site and an interpretation of the archaeological remains indicated by the site evaluation of 1991. The latter suggested that the most extensive surviving remains occupied a zone closest to the present day road frontage of the site, approximately 25m wide. It was thus proposed that this entire area be examined by clearance of topsoil and overburden deposits. In addition, those areas west of the road frontage zone to be occupied by the proposed store and part of its rear service area in the northern half of the site were to be examined in a similar fashion. These areas were exposed by a combination of mechanical excavation and hand cleaning; the exposed horizons of archaeological remains being recorded thereafter by a combination of detailed scale drawings and photography (Fig. 2).

Ongoing discussions during the course of the excavation programme have resulted in a scheme for the proposed development that should ensure preservation *in situ* by burial for the great majority of archaeological remains encountered. Only the excavations for foundations and services now pose a major threat, one response to which involved the controlled excavation of transects across the site that correspond with the positions of the outer wall foundations for the proposed new building. A further response will comprise an archaeological watching and recording brief, to be

undertaken in tandem with foundation and other groundworks during the early stages of the development. These excavation transects, along with other limited and selective sampling of archaeological contexts across the site, have provided additional data to complement the more extensive horizon of exposure and thus enhance this preliminary interpretation of the remains uncovered. Initial finds processing is still underway and no systematic assessment of these and other material or records from the excavations has yet been made. The conclusions offered at this stage can only therefore be provisional.

Results

Broadly, an L-shaped area was subject to investigation (Fig. 2), the upright arm corresponding to the present Fosse Way road frontage. At the time of excavation the site was almost level, with a slight rise to the west, where horizontally bedded Lias limestone was exposed virtually at the surface. Further east the limestone surface descended by a metre or more, as seen along the eastern roadside boundary of the site. This slope was largely masked by an extensive deposit of red-orange silty clay, over 0.5m thick in places, which covered much of the site. The archaeological remains were almost exclusively set upon or cut into this deposit, to depths rarely exceeding 250-300mm, and their character was probably influenced by its presence.

Archaeologically, the site divides into two zones; a strip some 25m wide back from the road edge along its full length and continuing north and south, with evidence of intensive Roman occupation – *Zone 1* – and a zone with much sparser remains extending back from it to the western extremity of the plot – *Zone 2*.

Zone 1 – adjacent to the road – is characterised by extensive spreads of limestone rubble, within which may be distinguished areas of paving, pitched floor foundations, worn cobbles and more random rubble, as well as structures such as wall foundations, hearths or ovens, ditches, drains and other possible building settings. Amongst these features were substantial quantities of pottery, animal bone, and, more rarely, objects of metal including coins, brooches, fittings and ornaments, tools and other implements of iron and copper alloy, lead – mainly melt fragments, some slag and furnace lining fragments, and stone objects – principally sharpening stones and quern fragments – as well as occasional dressed architectural fragments.

Combining the evidence of exposed surface horizons with the excavated sample sequences, the area appears to subdivide into at least three main structural units. Three stone building foci were recognised, spaced approximately equidistant from each other (c 25-30m) along the former Fosse Way road frontage and at right-angles to it. These are identified from north to south as Structures 1, 2 and 3. In two instances (1 & 2) the front and rear wall foundation lines for the proposed new store correspond with their location, permitting more detailed examination by excavation along the foundation transects A and B

Preliminary results indicate prolonged occupation and at least three phases of construction for both buildings, with a further structural phase successive to their demolition. The sequence probably began early in the 2nd century AD, or a little before, apparently continuing until at least the end of the 4th century. The stone buildings, up to 20m long and 4-5m wide, contained evidence of internal

subdivisions, hearths, ovens and other evidence for processing activities, and were characterised by a rounded-corner construction. The remains of Structure 3 suggest a similar character and sequence, although only the post-building demolition structures were clear.

The buildings were separated by extensive areas of stone rubble, within which are recognised worn cobbles or paving, pitched stone platforms, drains, hearth and oven structures and occasional ditches. These are identified as Plot A north of Structure 1, Plot B to its south, Plot C south of Structure 2, and a presumed Plot D south of Structure 3. Only limited areas were sampled by further excavation within these plots but relatively shallow stratigraphic sequences seem to be widely present, rarely exceeding 300mm in depth. Further analysis of their recorded surfaces will almost certainly reveal more of the character and former structures occupying these areas. Some structures are sealed beneath the latest surviving plot surfaces, including two large pits sampled in Plot C and several ditches. Of the latter, the most important were those set parallel with and adjacent to the buildings. Where investigated, sequences of recutting or redefinition by drystone walls, suggest the long-term maintenance of boundaries that may have originated late in the 1st Century AD.

One opportunity was taken to investigate the western perimeter of the Roman Foss Way road. This was located in truncated form below 19th and 20th century surfaces of Fosse Lane in the southeast corner of Plot 3, where its lower construction levels and at least two cobbled surfaces survived above the natural clay silt sealing the bedrock. The earliest surviving road surface appears to have utilised sandstone conglomerate quarried from Beacon Hill on Mendip. No original roadside ditch was found, but later ditches probably drained a narrow verge alongside the road, separating it from the frontages of Structures 1-3 and their adjacent plots.

Zone 2 was only investigated across the full width of the site beneath the proposed site for the new store development (Fig. 2). In contrast to *Zone 1*, archaeological features and deposits were sparsely represented, although some remains could have been lost here through previous topsoil stripping. Most of *Zone 2* lay to the west of Plot B, and the boundary ditches defining the latter north and south were traced for some distance across the clay surfaces. At its western end the clay thins out above the rising limestone bedrock where further ditches and features were identified. Some of these rock-cut features define what may be a set of enclosures or plots on a NNE-SSW axis. The most completely exposed area contained a shallow quarry, and what may have been a driveway lay to the west. This system appears not to be linked directly or aligned precisely with the road frontage plots, although parts were re-cut during the 2nd Century. A suspected 4th Century or later inhumation burial was inserted into one of the shallow ditches alongside the driveway.

Provisional interpretation

The earliest archaeological structure identified is the western edge of the Foss Way, although occasional sherds of prehistoric pottery were recovered from a suspected buried soil horizon beneath it. However, the alignment of the ditches at the western end of *Zone 2* and the evidence of some 2nd Century AD re-cutting raises the possibility of a surviving pre-Roman field system remnant here. The construction of

the Fosse Way presumably dates from the mid-40s AD by the Roman army, soon after the conquest of AD43.

The layout and beginnings of occupation in Zone 1 post-dates a period of erosion and deposition to the west from the worn surface of the original road. This probably commenced with the layout of plots defined by a series of ditches aligned broadly east west from the road frontage. Only Plots B and C were fully exposed within the excavation site. These were soon to become the focus for buildings located close to their northern boundaries and set approximately at right angles to the main road, with their frontages close to its western edge. To the south an accompanying plot probably housed activities and perhaps ancillary buildings relating to the function and use of the buildings. Structures 1 and 2 were of stone and probably two-storied, though possibly of half-timbered construction; their rounded exterior corners indicative of thatched or possibly wood shingle roofs. No clay or stone roof tile debris was found on the site. Both were rebuilt two or three times, with minor variations in size and internal arrangements, although some walls were retained in rebuilding. These are most likely to have been combination buildings, foci for both commercial/retailing, small-scale manufacturing/cottage industries, and residences for those engaged in such activity.

There was no clear evidence for a primary timber building phase, but the stone buildings were eventually replaced by pitched stone platforms, industrial features – notably hearths and ovens, and other structural features hinting at the creation of timber-framed buildings and other arrangements and activities which no longer respected either the stone building locations or the plots themselves. This pattern seems to be repeated for Structure 3, although little of its associated plot was seen. Plot A could continue this pattern with another building beyond the site to the north. These plots evidently continue for some distance westwards, to the rear of their main foci along the road frontage, though with a much reduced level of activity.

Determining a more precise chronology for this set of properties will require further analysis and research, but they probably originated towards the end of the 1st Century AD as part of a group of roadside shops, workshops and residences, which developed and evidently flourished over three centuries and more within the small town/market centre that was Roman Shepton Mallet. Evidence from elsewhere in the settlement hints that some life continued well beyond the conventional early 5th-Century end of Roman Britain, and some of the latest structural remains on this site may give further support to this hypothesis.

So far, the evidence from this site contrasts somewhat with that obtained previously by excavation in other parts of the settlement. From its character, the emphasis here seems to be more upon retailing and small-scale manufacture, within what may have been part of a distinct zone or quarter of the town, possibly of different status to areas seen elsewhere. Further analysis and research, part of the process that will bring these excavations to full publication, will undoubtedly refine and expand the picture.

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**FOSSE LANE
SHEPTON MALLET**
Wolf site SMW04
Excavation plan 2004



fence

Key

	excavation trench
	ditch
	wall
	edge of Fosse Way (approx.)

ZONE 2

ZONE 1

PLOT A

Structure 1

PLOT B

suggested ditch

transect A

transect B

Structure 2

PLOT C

ZONE 1



Structure 3

PLOT D

stone wall



Fig. 2

FOSSE LANE

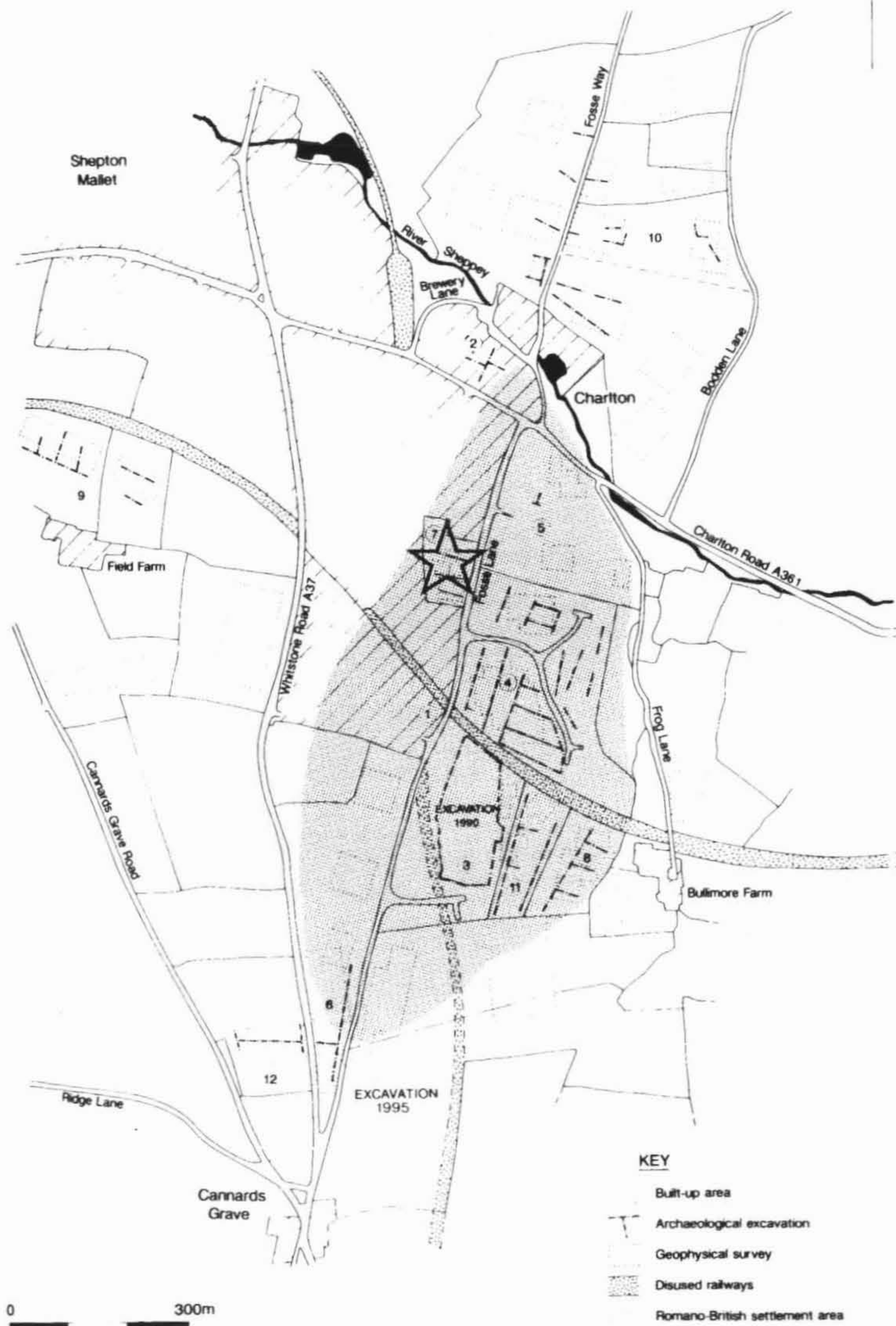


Fig. 1