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ILCHESTER, GREAT YARD ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS 1995

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Summary

Archaeological excavations in lieu of the construction of a new rising main across the Great Yard by Wessex Water were conducted by Bristol & Region Archaeological Services during the summer of 1995. The excavations allowed an examination of the nature and extent of the western suburbs of the Roman town supplementing previous excavations and fieldwork in the area.

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Introduction

During the summer of 1995, Wessex Water Services Ltd commissioned Bristol & Region Archaeological Services to undertake a watching brief during the laying of a new 0.5 km. rising main between Ilchester Sewage Treatment Works and its pumping station adjacent to the River Yeo just to the west of Ilchester Bridge. The pipeline traversed the entire length of the field known as the Great Yard lying within that area of Ilchester deemed by the Local Planning Authority to be of High Archaeological Potential, the eastern margins of which form part of the Ilchester Scheduled Ancient Monument. As a requirement of the Scheduled Monument Consent, that area covered by statutory protection and subject to potential destruction during the laying of the pipeline was almost fully excavated by hand, affording an opportunity to examine the suburban development of the Roman town, assumed to have extended north-westward to the banks of the river.

The Site

The flood plain meadow of the Great Yard lies within a meander of the River Yeo adjacent to the western margins of the modern town of Ilchester. The field, currently grazed and which contains a number of substantial earthworks, has recently been subject to an interpretative survey by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (Leach 1991b) and prior excavation by the by the same unit has examined its most easterly margins, now submerged beneath a modern development (Leach 1987 and 1991a). The eastern and southern perimeter of the field is marked by a substantial flood control bank, constructed by the Wessex Water Authority in 1981, also the

subject of an archaeological watching brief by the Western Archaeological Trust (Leach 1994, 80). Together with observations made by James Stevens Cox in the late 1940s and early 1950s these excavations have all suggested the presence of suburban occupation beyond the western defences of the Romano-British town

The new pipeline traversed the Great Yard from west to east and was inserted in virgin ground parallel to, but 4m to the north of an existing 6" main originally laid in 1950. The whole was fenced inside a 15m easement within which a minimal width of 5m of topsoil was removed to facilitate excavation of the pipe trench by machine. At both its western and eastern margins the trench bisected and was disturbed by the modern flood defence bank and at its eastern end the trench also crossed the garden of the modern house known as 'Old Acres' northwards from the pumping station before assuming its more westerly course. In its central section the pipeline passed to the south of the most prominent group of earthworks within the field comprising an abandoned oxbow meander whilst just to the east it obliquely breached the visible remains of a low, wide east-west bank.

Methodology

It was apparent from disturbed material observed during the initial stripping of topsoil from the site and from the recovery of finds from the spoil heaps that archaeological activity within the easement was confined primarily to the eastern end of the pipeline, extending only slightly outside the current limits of the Scheduled Area. Beyond this point, pipe-laying operations thus proceeded subject only to archaeological observation during the course of excavation, as they also did within the garden of 'Old Acres' where a narrower easement was topsoil stripped by hand to prevent extensive damage to the property.

However, whilst initial machining demonstrated the possible extent of archaeological activity within the Scheduled Area, the nature and concentration of this activity was far from clear. Therefore here, within the easement, an additional 2m. wide trench whose centreline was the course of the pipeline itself was machine dug through later overburden to allow the excavation by hand of earlier features beneath. An area of just over 300 m² thus became available for detailed examination and within this area, whilst total excavation was not a practical possibility by virtue of limited time or depth of stratigraphy, pre-Roman horizons of natural alluvium were reached in most cases and the majority of identified features were extensively sampled.

The Evidence

The evidence presented below attempts to place the excavated and identifiable archaeological features and deposits into an orderly framework of sequential periods which can broadly be related to the development of Ilchester as a whole, an aspect which has been discussed more extensively by Leach (Leach 1982 and 1992). It must however be born in mind that the identification of features was severely constrained by the linear nature of the excavation and that relationships between such features can frequently only be assumed by virtue of their assignment to particular periods based occasionally on recorded stratigraphy but largely on post excavation analysis of the recovered material. However, despite these limitations and the lack of fine detail, by analogy with adjacent excavations, a broad picture of the areas development does

emerge. Firstly with evidence of prehistoric activity followed by a phase of intensive early Roman agricultural activity possibly stimulated by a military presence. This in turn was succeeded by a period beginning with the construction of a north-south road aligned from which may have been a series of individual enclosures each potentially containing a road fronting property and within which isolated burials may suggest family groupings. Post-Roman activity is represented by the construction of the visible field bank, whilst walls, ditches a road and drain may potentially be assigned to aspects of the towns Medieval economy A little post-Medieval activity could also be distinguished but this was largely obscured by the very visible impact of the modern flood defences.

Although it was possible to recognise some elements of change within the broader Romano-British periods the extent of the exposed features was limited and it was considered impractical to further subdivide them. The following periods of activity were therefore assigned to the excavation:

Period 1	Prehistoric (Primarily pre-Roman Iron Age).
Period 2	1 st . - late 2 nd . century AD early Roman agricultural phase.
Period 3	Late 2 nd . - 4 th . century AD suburban occupation.
Period 4	Post-Roman/early Medieval.
Period 5	12 th . - 15 th . centuries Medieval structures.
Period 6	16 th . - 19 th centuries post-Medieval pit.
Period.7	Modern flood defences.

Period 1

Although several flint artefacts and a single, possible, Bronze Age pottery sherd were recovered during the course of the excavation none could be tied to any specific feature and their arbitrary nature renders them indicators only of periodic prehistoric activity within the area. Widely scattered though much disturbed ceramic evidence within later contexts however point to increasing prehistoric activity in the pre-Roman Iron Age although single cast bronze Durotrige coin recovered from context 270 may well have been in circulation into the early Roman period. However, only one ill defined feature, F334, the shallow remnant of what may have been a pit containing much animal bone and a small number of Middle Iron Age pottery shards may be ascribed to this period with some certainty being sealed by a broad, shallow, silt filled gully of Period 2 (F220).

Period 2

A small number of features ascribed to this period may tentatively be seen to belonging to its very earliest phase or potentially to later Period 1 by virtue of the higher incidence of pre-Roman ceramics, either within their fills or in the disturbed alluvium into which they were cut. These include F220 (above) F230 a shallow, flat based curving gully cut by Period 3 burial F331 and F368, a truncated, U shaped gully just west of the latter feature. Adjacent to F368 and marked by the presence of significant quantities of South Gaulish Flavian samian was located the margins of a potentially substantial pit F235 however its designation as a Period 2 feature is uncertain due to the presence of late 3rd. - 4th. century sherds and large fragments of

tegula in rubble spread 387 which both partially filled and sealed it. The contextual nature however of all these features remains unclear.

Also tentatively belonging to the earliest part of this period on stratigraphic and environmental grounds is F409, a possible oven or corn drier comprising the fractured remains of a large burnt quern within a matrix of hard baked clay containing much carbonised grain, together with a number of associated (?) features including post-hole F462 and burnt horizon 410. All were heavily cut by Period 3 ditch F250 and burials F253 and F428, the up-cast of which produced a number of 1st. century and earlier shards. Grain samples from F409 included free threshing wheat, Celtic bean and pea/vetch, were generally smaller and showed evidence of different processing methods from samples ascribed to later features. A second and probably later oven or corn drier, F 430 survived in better condition sealed beneath Period 3 floor(?) 290 and only slightly cut by pit or robber trench F263 to the south. The oven remains comprised heavily burnt ham stone and lias within a matrix of charcoal rich clay set into a circular chamber to the north of which lay a V profiled flue or rake out containing much burnt soil, ash and charcoal. Two further flues were visible in the southern section of the trench. An adjacent pit F437 can almost certainly be associated with the former feature containing similarly stratified fills and ceramics. Datable material from the flues of F430 and from F437 included a number of sherds of Flavian and Hadrianic samian together with other fabrics none of which need be later than the mid 2nd. century. Just to the west of these features, a dense spread of charcoal rich silt 270 cut by a series of later Period 2 post-holes contained further significant quantities of later Flavian samian together with the Durotrige coin noted above.

The complex of stone lined post-holes which cut layer 270 may represent successive phases of one or more timber structures, presumably buildings (barns ?), although no coherent plan could be identified. The proximity of all these features to the oven/kiln and pit suggest some form of relationship. However whilst the assignment of these features to Period 2 is based primarily on the content of their fills clear dating for them is not entirely evident. Although F272, F274, F276 and F442 all contained late 2nd. century material in their fills, F269 remains undated. F271 and F443 both contained sherds of late 3rd. - 4th. century pottery which may have been contaminating, F443 being sealed below a Period 3 rubble spread F275. Other post-holes may also be assigned to Period 2 including F299 and F507 towards the western limits of the excavation. However the only boundary features thought to be attributable to this period are the curving ditch F224 cut by Period 3 burial F223 and an unexcavated ditch(?) or gully(?) F248 also cut by features of Period 3.

Period 3

The beginning of Period 3 would appear to be marked by substantial change in the status of the area. The laying of a north-south road F282 may have preceded its penultimate suburbanisation and is almost certainly a continuation of the road identified in excavations in the eastern part of Great Yard in 1987 (Leach 1987). The road was initially cobbled with flint pebbles to a width of approximately 5m and was bounded on the west by a ditch F286. It was subsequently narrowed, resurfaced with lias slabs and relocated on the same alignment approximately 2m to the west where a second and slightly deeper ditch F479 was cut.

Potentially related to the road and to the beginnings of the suburban development of the area may have been the excavation of several substantial pits of which F279 and F544 were most extensively sampled. Elsewhere in Ilchester Leach has noted the probable function of such pits for the extraction of gravel and their characteristic distinguishing features, in-particular their relatively early Roman ceramic assemblages, the frequent presence of charred plant remains interleaved with redeposited clay and their often steep or overhanging sides penetrating into natural gravel. (Leach 1991a, 35). Both the above exhibited such features although the former was dug as a single context and the latter showed evidence of multi-directional tipping and re-cutting which proved impossible to fully clarify within the limits of the excavated trench.

Contemporary(?) with the road and probably aligned with relation to it was the laying out of a series of linear ditches, possibly property boundaries orientated approximately NNE-SSW, such features finding parallels with similar ditches excavated at Little Spittle and Pill Bridge Lane to the south (Leach 1982 and 1991a). These include a shallow stone capped ditch F225, the more readily defined ditches F240 and F250, both with similar fills and spade cut profiles, and a mortared stone wall F265. This latter feature, constructed on pitched lias footings and orientated in the same direction is well made but would appear somewhat insubstantial for a building. It may represent an enclosure wall or the rear end of a structure which could possibly have fronted on the road which would have lain approximately 20m to the south. The wall showed clear evidence of having been partially demolished, robbed and then rebuilt to a poorer standard, lacking its former pitched footings. This may have been as a result of the removal of a return wall to the east indicated by the existence of a shallow, rubble filled pit F263 which also cut through traces of a heavily disturbed mortar floor 262. West of the road and observed only during the excavation of the pipe trench was a further ditch F242. Its exposure was too limited to confirm its precise orientation although it would appear to have been similar to the above and material from its fill would seem to place it within Period 3.

At the eastern end of the excavation, on a different east-west alignment and cut deeply into undisturbed alluvium, a further ditch F206 may represent part of a flood defensive system adjacent the river at the rear of the Roman suburbs. This interpretation is based on the existence of a parallel shallow ditch or gully F209, 4m to the south and separated from the former by a narrow exposure of disturbed natural silts penetrated by a series of stake holes F212, F213 and F351. The lowest fills of F206 and that of F209 both contained late 3rd - 4th century material suggesting their earlier coexistence. In excavations at Castle Farm only 50m to the east Leach identified two similar ditches F517 and F513, projections of which align fairly precisely with the present features (Leach 1991a, 18). No northerly return of the present ditches could be noted in the pipe trench observed in the grounds 'Old Acres' and a continuation of the earlier features, in-particular the former may be envisaged. However Leach has presented evidence of a 1st - 2nd century date for these ditches and no such early origins could be devised from the evidence of the present excavations.

With the exception of the wall F265 and mortared floor 262 noted above, evidence for the existence of structural features or buildings to the north-east of the road was confined to narrow exposures of apparent demolition rubble F246 and F275, shallow, partially exposed scoops filled with domestic debris F235 and F238, and a pit containing further occupational material, F245. South-west of the road structural evidence was more forthcoming in the form of two short, parallel lengths of pitched

rubble footings F288 and F291, possibly representing different phases of the same structure. F291 cut both traces of a mortar floor 290 and the final fills of Pit F544 indicating the redundancy of this feature by the later Roman period. A further possible length of wall(?) also parallel to the former but totally robbed of any structural material was represented by a shallow, gravel filled ditch F300 approximately 12m to the west. At the extreme western end of the excavation, secondary machining exposed an area of lias paving F557 which in places showed evidence of having been subject to intensive burning and which was sealed by substantial quantities of building rubble containing a large number of 4th century coins many of which represented possible barbarous local imitations. A building is assumed to have lain in close proximity to this feature although no structural elements were determinable.

The absence of distinct structural features to the east of the road suggests the pipe trench to have been traversing through enclosures to the rear of any buildings which may have fronted onto the road bisecting the area. Thus the occurrence of several burials upon or adjacent to boundary features bears some parallel with previously identified cemetery complexes within the suburbs of the Roman town. Three adult male inhumations were recovered from the excavated trench although their dispersal did not allow them to be tied to any such definable complex. All were orientated NE-SW and datable evidence suggests none to be earlier than the late 3rd century. F223 comprised a shallow, crouched male inhumation, resting upon a large iron ladle and cutting Period 2 ditch F224. There was no surviving evidence of the body being lain within a coffin and the grave itself would appear to have been cut by an undated but possibly later Roman post placement F222. Of burial F331, only the femur, tibia, fibula and skull survived, the skull being buried within a separate coffin, denoted by surviving nails, upon the feet. The final male inhumation F303 lay to the west of the road buried within a potentially large wooden coffin and sealed by substantial lias slabs. The grave provided a coin of Gallienus (253-68 AD) and the body a possible 1st century Flavian As apparently deliberately inserted between the upper (?) vertebrae. As already noted there was no indication that any of these burials comprised part of larger groupings. However, a further, well constructed grave, F253 was excavated but found to be empty, suggesting the deliberate removal of the body. This grave both cut and was cut by two further burials, F428 and F376, the former of a foetus, the latter a neonate. It is possible such a cluster represents a family grouping and that the remaining burials are also associated with similar although unidentified groupings within individual Period 3 enclosures.

Period 4

With the exception of the most easterly and westerly sections of the excavation, the transition between the Romano-British and Medieval periods was marked by a distinct discontinuity comprising an almost continuous gravel spread F324. No features could be ascribed to the post-Roman period with the possible exception of the linear and still visible east-west field bank F310 cut obliquely by the line of the pipe trench. In section, the bank comprised a buried stony soil distinct from 324 by virtue only of its higher clay content and the presence of a number of early Medieval pottery sherds.

Period 5

At the eastern end of the excavation Romano-British features were cut both by modern activity and by the lower courses of a substantial, mortared, north-south wall F211 flanked on its western side by a narrow, pitched stone pavement F311 bordering a flint cobbled trackway F215 containing a stone lined drain F214 in its centre. The wall and pavement perpetuated the line of an earlier ditch F374 the fill of which contained much 12th - 13th century pottery. A second, similarly mortared, east-west wall F207, largely robbed and heavily disturbed by the modern flood defence bank may represent a return of the former just to the north, following the line of the Roman ditch F206. Although the upper horizons of all the later features at the eastern end of the excavation had been largely destroyed by the construction of the modern flood defences, evidence from the silting of drain F214 would seem to suggest limited currency beyond the 14th century at latest. Elsewhere within the excavated pipe trench a small number of additional features, primarily post-holes may be ascribed to Period 5 on the basis of their fills including possibly F218 and certainly F256, however their contextual relationship to medieval activity in the area as a whole remains incomprehensible.

Period 6

With the exception of the modern flood defence scheme whose impact on the archaeology within the Great Yard has already been noted, a single pit F394 was the only identifiable post-Medieval feature of note cutting the Medieval pavement F311 (above). Almost certainly, the primary post-Medieval activity across most of the Great Yard has been agricultural.

Discussion

Despite the limited nature of these excavations and the absence of extensive contextual evidence they remain of value in providing some insights into the possible course of Romano-British suburban development to the west of Ilchester and of its physical extent. However the basis of much interpretation lies largely in evidence derived from adjacent evaluations which by their nature provide only a narrow view of the whole although parallels may also be drawn from evidence provided by those areas of the town and suburbs subject to more extensive excavation.

Prehistoric. (Period 1)

In common with many of the excavated sites within and around Ilchester whilst prehistoric material could frequently be noted features could rarely be defined, the bulk of the evidence for early activity being derived from disturbed material within secondary contexts. In the main the recovered ceramic evidence was poor with no well defined rim sherds, however the predominance of Ilchester fabric types A and B and their broad distribution towards the eastern end of the excavation would seem to indicate the possibility of fairly extensive Early to Middle Iron Age activity in this area. This corresponds to some extent with evidence from adjacent excavations at Castle Farm where a Middle Iron Age date has been suggested for any possible settlement which may have existed here.

Early Roman. (Period 2)

The status of Great Yard during the 1st and early 2nd centuries remains somewhat unclear. Identifiable features of the earliest part of the period are uninterpretable although of the two recorded ovens or kilns, the contents and structure of at least one hint strongly at an agricultural usage. That of the second and more complete example together with its potentially associated buildings (barns?), is less than clear but an absence of any industrial debris and the presence of further plant remains again suggest its function to be related to crop processing. Leach has suggested that Ilchester may have functioned as a staging post for the distribution of foodstuffs from the later 1st century (Leach 1991a) and it is tempting to see this area outside(?) of the defensive perimeter of the early fort, to be subject to intensive activity stimulated initially by military needs and later by the demands of a burgeoning civil settlement. Such activity may well have related primarily to the processing of food prior to its distribution via the postulated port facilities on the River Yeo.

Later Roman. (Period 3)

The laying out of a north-south road across the area in the later 2nd century would appear to mark the genesis of the areas suburban development. The road is almost certainly that previously identified by Leach and thus probably the main artery into the suburb from a postulated West Gate of the Roman town (Leach 1987). The form of the suburban development would appear to parallel that identified to the south of the town with potential buildings fronting onto the road, to the rear of which rectilinear ditched or walled boundaries may have enclosed ancillary structures or contained activities related to the roadside properties. The full extent and nature of this development remains unknown but would seem to have been primarily domestic and reasonably sophisticated to judge from the fragments of painted wall plaster, quantities of tesserae, ceramic roof and hypocaust tile fragment derived from demolition spreads and pit fills. Although a late 2nd - early 3rd century date is assumed for the beginnings of this settlement it would appear to have been at its maximum in the later 3rd or early 4th centuries when buildings of stone were certainly established to the south of the road and most probably to the north. Associated with these may have been small cemeteries representing individual family groups. The full extent of these cannot at present be determined but there is no reason to think that may not be widespread as those identified in Townsend Close to the south (Leach 1982).

Post Roman. (Periods 4-6)

No identifiable features can be readily ascribed to the immediate post-Roman period and the excavation adds little to our knowledge of the areas urban decline. Only the narrow undisturbed and virtually continuous horizon of silty gravel which sealed most of the Romano-British features suggests the almost complete abandonment of the area, probably to agricultural usage in the centuries following the withdrawal of Rome.

The earliest indication of subsequent activity would appear to be the erection of the low, broad and still visible east-west bank which may just possibly be of a pre-conquest date. Its purpose is unknown although it may have served as an early flood defence with traces of ridge and furrow ploughing notable to the south (Leach 1991b).

The most significant of the identifiable Medieval features remains the north-south road and walls at the eastern end of the excavation and thus not unduly distant from the known course of the Medieval town wall. Although the orientation of the road places it on line to bisect the Medieval walls at a position similar to that of the postulated West Gate of the Roman period, its course was not identified in earlier excavations (Leach 1991a). Whilst a hypothesis may be developed that such a road served potential medieval port facilities archaeology has yet to demonstrate the full extent and nature of the Medieval and post-Medieval town beyond the limits of its walls although the evidence both from this and previous excavations show that the immediate vicinity of the town was an area of considerable Medieval activity.

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