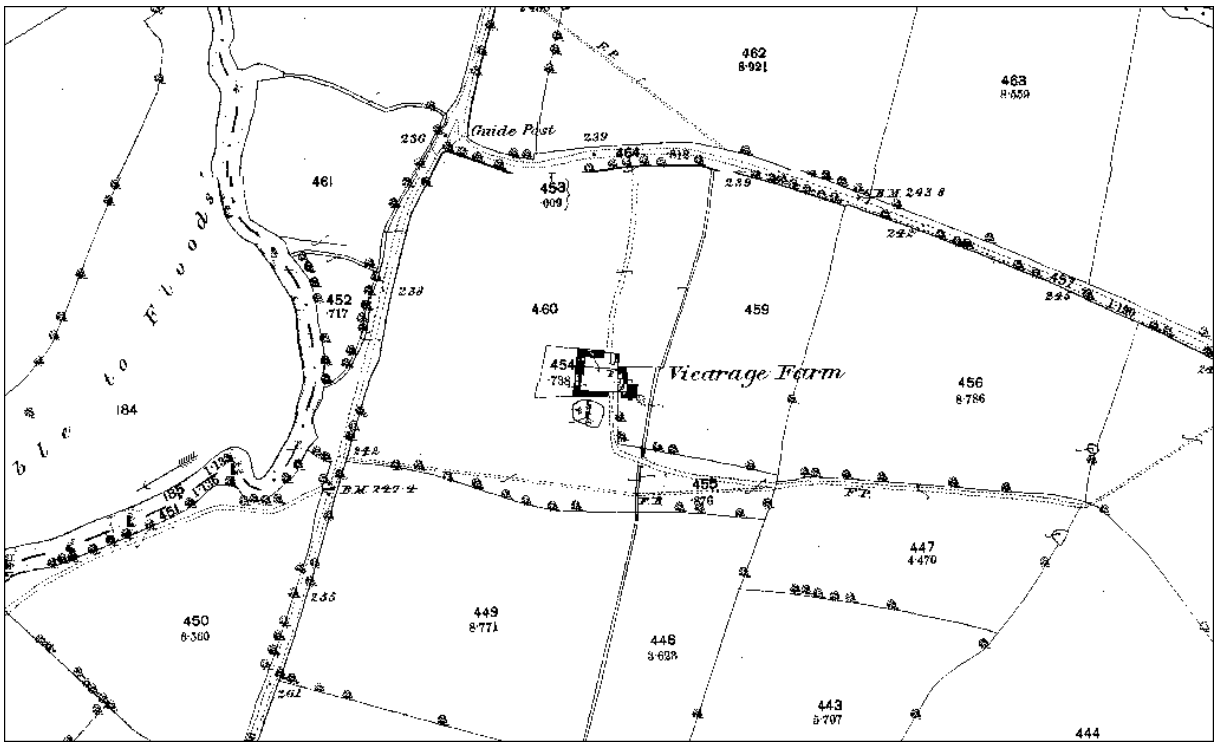
Archaeological Evaluation at

Vicarage Farm, Coventry Road,

Wolston, Warwickshire



Report 0818

April 2008

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Contents

List of Figures

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Warwickshire Museum Field Services
The Butts
Warwick
CV34 4SS

Summary

Trial trenching at Vicarage Farm, Wolston, Warwickshire, was undertaken to evaluate the proposed site of a new manege to be positioned some 150m to the east of the Fosse Way. The trenches revealed the remains of a Romano-British settlement, probably a small farmstead, indicated by pits and ditches which contained a small assemblage of pottery. A higher frequency of charcoal and features on the west side of the evaluation site suggest that the focus of settlement may have been nearer the Fosse Way, although an unconfirmed report of Roman coins being recovered during pond construction immediately to the south of Vicarage Farm suggests that activity may have been extended along the roadside to the south.

1. Introduction

1.1 Planning permission has been granted by Rugby Borough Council for the construction of a manege at Vicarage Farm, Coventry Road, Wolston (Ref R07/2154/PLN). Vicarage Farm lies in an area of considerable archaeological potential and it was therefore a condition of planning permission that the applicant secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological fieldwork before the development commenced. An archaeological brief for an initial field evaluation was prepared by the Planning Archaeologist (dated February 2008).

1.2 Warwickshire Museum Archaeology Projects Group were commissioned to undertake such an evaluation in April 2008. This report presents the results of that work. The project archive will be lodged with the Warwickshire Museum under site code WV08.

2. Location

2.1 Vicarage Farm lies on the south side of the Coventry Road between Wolston and Church Lawford located at national grid reference SP 4305 7650 in the parish of Wolston. The site of the proposed manege lies immediately south of the existing building complex (Fig 1).

2.2 The development site lies in the Avon Valley, on the first gravel terrace on the south side of the Avon (British Geological Survey 1984). The first terrace is broadly flat although it falls gradually away to the north towards a longstanding river crossing at Bretford. To the south-west, an outcrop of Mercia Mudstone and Wolston Sand and Gravel is capped by a remnant fourth terrace island and to the south-east the land rises on to the shoulder of the Dunsmore plateau.

3. Archaeological and Historical Background

3.1 The River Avon, in the vicinity of Vicarage Farm, has been a focus for human activity since the arrival of hunter-gatherers at the end of the last Ice Age some 10,000 years ago (Palmer 2006). Evidence for Mesolithic period (*c*8000 BC – 4000 BC) activity, in the form of distinctive flint tools and waste products, has been recovered from either side of the river during archaeological fieldwork (Warwickshire Historic Environment Record Nos MWA 6043 and MWA 6044; Palmer 2006).

3.2 These locations may have retained a particular significance to local people in the following Neolithic period (*c*4000 BC – 2200 BC), during which time scatters of pits

were dug and filled with pottery, flint, animal bone, the embers from fires and even human remains (MWA 8818, MWA 8819). Excavations have shown that these activities continued in the area for some 1500 years, preceding and continuing during the construction of some large-scale ceremonial and burial monuments (Palmer 2003, 2006, 2008), such as the earlier phases of the barrow cemetery in King's Newnham (Scheduled Ancient Monument, Warwickshire 163; MWA 3445, MWA 5675), and the open ended enclosure in Church Lawford (MWA 3455) with its attendant ring ditches (MWA 6080) and oblong enclosure.

3.3 A number of other cropmark ring-ditches in the vicinity, which probably represent the ploughed out remains of burial mounds, also attest to the importance of the locale in the Earlier Bronze Age (*c*2200 BC – 1500 BC) (MWA 4270, MWA 5409, MWA 5676, MWA 4945). It is thought likely that much of the population in the Neolithic and earlier Bronze Age lived largely mobile lives, driving their herds between areas of grazing on a seasonal round, as there is currently no evidence for permanent settlement in the region at this time (Palmer forthcoming).

3.4 Permanent settlement of the area probably began during the later prehistoric period (Late Bronze Age *c*1500 BC – 800 BC and Iron Age 800 BC – 43 AD). This period of gradual population increase and agricultural intensification also saw climactic deterioration, a combination that is likely to have influenced the demarcation of land-units and the creation of boundary features. Cropmark features likely to date from this period are widespread in the area, with both boundary features (MWA 5677, MWA 3457, MWA 5408, MWA3421) and settlements represented (MWA 3422, MWA 3456 MWA 5411, MWA 5617). Part of a late Iron Age enclosure (MWA 3456) was excavated in 1990 (Palmer 2003). An Iron Age coin was found by a metal detectorists just south of Vicarage Farm (MWA 6114).

3.5 The Roman Fosse Way (MWA 4759) passes close by the west side of the current site, although evidence for any settlement in its vicinity has hitherto not been forthcoming. Evidence for Romano-British quarrying was excavated in King's Newnham (Palmer 2003) and the Iron Age coin (MWA 6114) would typically have derived from a Roman context.

3.6 The medieval hamlet at Bretford (MWA 10259) developed around a ford across the Avon where the possibly medieval Tutbury Lane (MWA 3657) diverged from the Fosse Way, perhaps as a shorter route to Brinklow and thence Ansty. The hamlet belonged to the Verdon family at Brandon castle and in 1227 John de Verdon obtained a grant for a market at Bretford, although his plans to develop a borough there seem to have failed (VCH 1951, 273). During the reign of Edward 1 (1272-1307) a medieval gallows was constructed (MWA 4257) and a windmill is recorded at Bretford in the years 1279 and 1360 (VCH 1951, 273). A bridge is first mentioned in 1279 but this was in great decay in the 17th century (MWA 4255), and although the present structure is medieval in design, it was rebuilt in the 18th century (MWA 5548).

3.7 The remains of probable 18th century lime kilns used for the improvement of the local acid soils were recorded adjacent to The Grange (MWA 3436).

3.8 An unsubstantiated report of the finding of three Roman coins during the construction of ponds on the south side of Vicarage Farm was related to the writer during the present fieldwork project.

4. Trial trenches

4,1 All three trenches were dug by a tracked 360° excavator using a 1.8m wide ditching bucket under archaeological supervision.

Trench 1

4.2 Trench 1 was 25.5m long, aligned east to west in the north-east corner of the development area (Figs 2 & 4). Geological natural was brown sandy gravel with frequent iron pan (**104**). At the east end of the trench the geological natural **104** was cut by a large pit **101**, which contained modern demolition material (Fig 4). The pit was machined out to *c*1m below ground surface but was abandoned because of water ingress and the inclusion of plastic at that level (fills **102** and **103**). This feature may well have been a pond. The geological natural was sealed by *c*0.30m of greyish-brown sandy silt loam topsoil (**100**).

Trench 2

4.3 This trench, originally 25m in length, was aligned north-east to south-west and was extended a further 8m north-east in order to ascertain the width of feature **211** (Figs 2 & 5). Geological natural at the south-western end of the trench was reddish-yellow sand (**213**) whilst to the north-east it was brown sandy gravel (**214=104**).

4.4 Feature **211** remained somewhat ambiguous given that it extended outside the confines of the trench (Fig 2). A small test slot excavated through it revealed the irregular form of more than one cut *c*0.6m deep, but further excavation was deemed imprudent within the confines of the trench. These cuts also penetrated the water table. A lower fill of grey sandy loam and gravel (**215**), was overlaid by a 0.30m thick undifferentiated layer of dark greyish-brown, gravel-free and charcoal-rich, sandy loam (**212**), which yielded Romano-British pottery.

4.5 To the south-west of **211** a possible ditch **216** was aligned north-west to south-east. It was at least 2m wide and possibly over 0.75m deep, the lower part remaining unexcavated as it was below the water table. Where visible, it appeared to be filled with grey loamy gravel (**217**) (Figs 2 & 3/C).

4.6 Ditch **216** was cut by a large pit **203** which had steep sloping sides 2m in diameter and a flattish base 0.50m deep. It was filled with very dark greyish-brown charcoal-rich, silty loam (**204**) (Figs 2, 3/C & 9).

4.7 Gully **201** was aligned east to west across the middle of the trench. It had steep sloping sides 0.31m wide, a flat base 0.13m deep and was filled with very dark greyish-brown, charcoal-rich, sandy loam (**202**) (Figs 2, 3/B & 6). No finds were recovered from this feature.

4.8 At the south-western end of the trench a partially visible possible pit **205** had an uncertain relationship to ditch **207**. Pit **205** had a sloping eastern side and a rounded base 0.46m deep and contained an earlier fill of yellowish-brown sandy loam (**206**). Ditch **207** was aligned north to south on the eastern side of **205**. It was in excess of 1.3m wide with a shallow V-shaped profile and a rounded base 0.40m deep (Figs 2, 3/A & 8). It was entirely filled with dark brown, charcoal-rich, sandy loam (**208**), which also spread across the adjacent pit fill (**206**), although an accumulation of large pebbles was removed from the interface between these two features. A small assemblage of Romano-British pottery which included a single residual sherd of Iron Age pottery was recovered from this layer.

4.9 Both **205** and **207** were cut by a shallow hollow **209**, which given that it was over 4.5m wide, may have been a medieval furrow. It was filled with yellowish-brown/greyish-brown loam with frequent manganese and iron pan staining (Figs 2, 3/A & 8). Two sherds of Romano-British pottery were recovered from this fill (**210**).

4.10 All the features were sealed by *c*0.30m of topsoil (**200**) which varied from brown sandy silt loam at the south-western end of the trench to greyish-brown sandy silt loam at the north-eastern end.

Trench 3

4.11 Trench 3 was aligned broadly east to west, albeit with a subtle kink in the centre, and was originally 25m long but extended a further 4m in order to expose feature **301** (Figs 2 & 7). Geological natural across the trench was brown sandy gravel (**303=214=104**).

4.12 Ditch **301** was aligned north to south, had moderately sloping sides 2.1m wide and a slightly rounded base 0.40m deep. It was filled with dark greyish-brown silty loam with iron pan mottling (**302**) from which Romano-British pottery was recovered (Figs 2, 3/D & 10). The entire trench was sealed by *c*0.30m of greyish-brown sandy silt loam topsoil (**300**).

5. Conclusions

5.1 The excavated evidence from Trenches 2 and 3 clearly indicates the presence of a sub-surface Romano-British site. The nature of the site is difficult to ascertain on the basis of the excavated evidence; particularly as the only finds group recovered was ceramic. The pottery points to occupation during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. However, given the location on the river terrace and the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it is likely that the site was a small farmstead.

5.2 The function of the individual features examined are hard to gauge, although it may be pertinent that the linear ditches (**207**, **216**, **301**) and the gully (**201**), are broadly aligned on the nearby Fosse Way. It is therefore possible to envisage a series of enclosures, paddocks and fields surrounding the farmstead, presumably with access to the road. Pit **203**, and possibly pit group (**211**), may have served a number of functions including storage.

5.3 There was no evidence for buildings within the trenches but the frequency of pottery across the site and the charcoal-rich nature of the features uncovered suggest that a focal point of the settlement lies in the near vicinity. This is likely to be on the west side of the application area given their predominance on this side of the site.

5.4 No animal bone was recovered but the Avon gravels are notoriously acid and frequently do not preserve organic remains other than the larger mammalian bones unless in anaerobic (oxygen free) conditions. It is therefore noteworthy that features **101**, **216** and **211** penetrated the water table at *c*1.0m below the present ground surface. There is therefore a possibility that some features associated with the Romano-British farmstead will have been sunk below the water table and may remain waterlogged and thus organic evidence will survive in anaerobic conditions.

5.5 There are no known Romano-British settlements in the area although cropmark complexes such as MWA 5408 to the north of Vicarage Farm seem likely to include elements of this date. It would though be reasonable to suppose that a settlement existed at the crossing point of the Avon and this may have developed around an early fort, notwithstanding that it is no longer widely accepted that the Fosse Way was a military frontier. The three coins hearsay would have recovered from the area of the ponds to the south of Vicarage Farm suggest that some form of activity extends at least 1km along the roadside south of the river. Nevertheless, given the frequency of probable prehistoric settlement cropmarks along the Avon terraces it would be surprising if the area was not intensively farmed in the Romano-British period and it is in this context that we should see the Vicarage Farm settlement.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: List of Contexts

Trench	*Context*	*Type*	*Width (m)*	*Depth (m)*	*Description*
1	**100**	Topsoil		0.30	Greyish-brown sandy silt loam
	101	Pit	?	?	Probable modern pond
	102	Fill of **101**			Dark greyish-brown silty loam with modern debris
	103	Fill of **101**			Brown silty loam
	104	Natural			Brown sandy gravel with iron pan
	105				
2	**200**	Topsoil		0.30	Greyish-brown sandy silt loam
	201	Gully	0.31	0.13	Steep sides and flat base
	202	Fill of **201**			Very dark greyish-brown sandy loam (charcoal rich)
	203	Pit	2.00	0.50	Steep sloping sides and flattish base
	204	Fill of **203**			Very dark greyish-brown silty loam (charcoal rich)
3	**205**	Possible pit	?	0.46	Partially visible with rounded base
	206	Fill of **205**			Yellowish-brown sandy loam
	207	Ditch	1.30	0.40	Wide V-shape with rounded base
	208	Fill of **207** and **205**			Dark brown sandy loam (charcoal rich)
	209	Hollow?	4.50	0.20	Possible furrow
	210	Fill of **209**			Yellowish-brown/greyish-brown sandy loam with iron pan
	211	Hollow?	?	?	Amorphous cut
	212	Fill of **211**			Dark greyish-brown sandy loam (charcoal rich)
	213	Natural			Reddish-yellow sand 10% gravel
	214	Natural			Brown sandy gravel
	215	Fill of **211**			Grey sandy loam and gravel
	216	Ditch	2.00	0.75+	Uncertain
	217	Fill of **216**			Grey loamy gravel
	300	Topsoil		0.30	Greyish-brown sandy silt loam
	301	Ditch	2.10	0.40	Sloping sides and rounded base
	302	Fill of 301			Dark greyish-brown silty loam
	303	Natural			Brown sandy gravel with iron pan

Appendix B: List of Finds

Context	Material	Quantity	Date/Comments
204	Pottery	13	Roman
204	Roof Tile	1	Roman
204	Daub	4	Probably Roman
208	Pottery	5	4 Roman, 1 Iron Age
208	Daub	4	Probably Roman
210	Pottery	2	Roman
212	Pottery	16	Roman
302	Pottery	13	Roman
302	Tile	5	Roman

Fig. 4: Trench 1 from the east

Fig. 5: Trench 2 from the south-west

Fig. 6: Gully **201** from the east

Fig. 7: Trench 3 from the east

Fig. 8: Pit **205** and ditch **207** from the south

Fig. 9: Pit **203** from the south

Fig. 10: Ditch **301** from the south