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Archaeological Observation and Recording
at
The New Rectory, Butter Street, Alcester

August 1994

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August 1994

Warwickshire Museum
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Summary

Archaeological observation was carried out by staff of the Warwickshire Museum in connection with the construction of a new rectory and garage to the north west of The Rectory, Butter Street. The stone foundations of two walls of Roman date, probably from separate structures, were recorded. These were overlain by post medieval garden soils.

1. Introduction

1.1 Planning permission has been granted for the erection of a new rectory and garage at Butter Street, Alcester. Because the site of the new rectory lies within an area of archaeological sensitivity, near the line of the town defences of Roman Alcester, it was a condition of the planning permission that a programme of archaeological work be carried out in conjunction with the development.

1.2 A programme of fieldwork in accordance with a brief prepared by the County Planning Archaeologist on behalf of the Planning Authority was commissioned from the Warwickshire Museum and carried out in July 1994. This report presents the results of that programme.

2. Location

2.1 The site (Fig. 1) lies to the rear of the Rectory, Butter Street in the parish of Alcester, located around national grid reference SP 08985748. The total area of the current proposal (Ref S91/0013) affects some 750 sq metres which is presently garden.

2.2 The underlying geology of the site is 1st/2nd river terrace gravels.

3. Archaeological Background

3.1 The site of the development lies within the defended area of the Roman Town of Alcester (Warwickshire Sites and Monuments Record No. WA 4495) close to its western defensive line (Fig. 1).

3.2 An evaluation trench was excavated to the rear of the rectory prior to proposed development in 1991 (WA 5837). The south east end of the trench revealed pits, ditches and layers consistent with its lying within the Roman urban area, though some may have been of medieval date. The north west end of the trench revealed a series of compact layers of clay, silt and gravel which have been interpreted, somewhat tentatively, as belonging to the rampart of the 2nd century town defences.

3.3 Other excavations in the vicinity have recovered more certain evidence for the town defences. A watching brief carried out to the west next to Bulls Head Yard in 1984 recorded gravel and clay layers from the late 2nd century earthwork defences (WA 506) along with evidence for timber piles and sandstone, possibly associated with the later (4th century) town wall (WA 4494). Evidence for both sets of town defences was recovered from excavations in 1985 prior to the construction of the Gateway Supermarket further south west (WA 5001). Excavations in 1964 to the north, next to the former Old Rectory Gardens, discovered the remains of an old river channel, probably open water in Roman times (WA 4490), along with a red clay and gravel bank thought to be the remains of the late 2nd century defences.

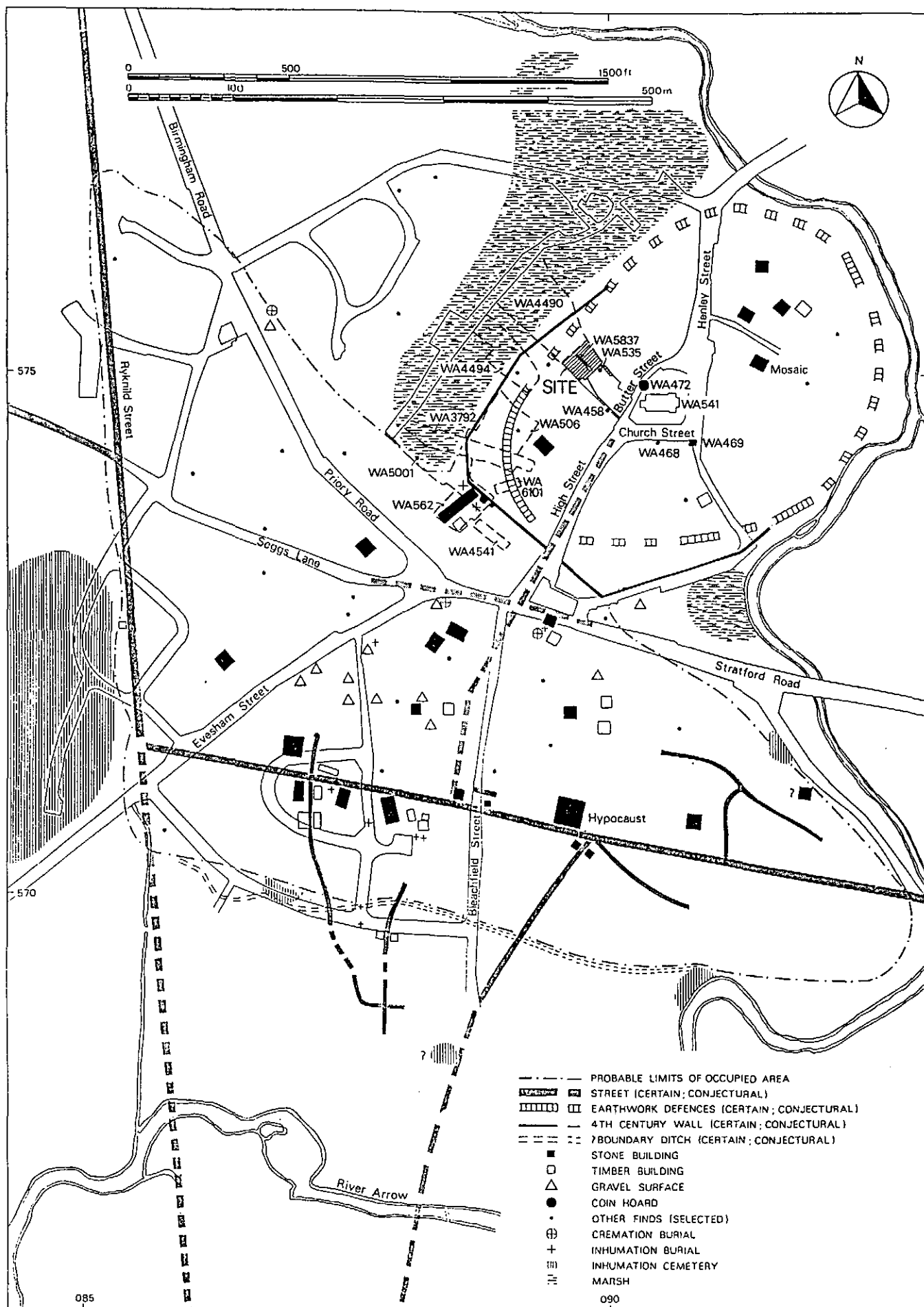


Fig. 1: Site Location

3.4 There is also considerable evidence for Roman activity within the defences. The High Street itself follows, in part, the line of a Roman Road (WA 451) and excavations at Coulters Garage (WA 562) to its west revealed a stone building over 40m long which may have been a grain store in the early 4th century. This was demolished when the late town wall was constructed over the site. Another stone building of Roman date was revealed by workmen excavating the foundations for a shop at the west end of the back garden of 27 High Street (WA 6101). Here the building had a floor of *opus signinum* (mortar) and finds included painted plaster and a stone tessera (from a mosaic), though these did not necessarily come from the building.

3.5 Other sites to the west of the High Street have revealed evidence of the old river channel (Midland Bank, WA 4541 and Market Site, WA 3792) without revealing any structural deposits.

3.6 Church Street has also yielded evidence of Roman activity including building foundations with associated pottery and tile from the corner of Malt Mill Lane (WA 469). Other finds consist of a whole samian ware bowl, imported from France, part of a lamp, a key and various coins, mostly recovered during the 1920-40's (WA 468).

3.7 A hoard of 800 silver and 16 gold coins was recovered from the cellar of the house adjoining the churchyard in Butter Street in 1638 (WA 472). The coins dated from 48 BC-337 AD and possibly later, containing examples from all the principal reigns.

3.8 A damaged Roman statue of a male figure wearing a form of tunic or chiton stood for some years against a wall adjoining the rectory (WA 458). It was moved to the Grammar School in 1924 to protect it from further damage and is now on display in the Warwickshire Museum.

3.9 The Rectory lies across Butter Street from the medieval Parish church of St Nicholas (WA 541), a structure dating from the 13th century with alterations in the 14th, 15th, 18th and 19th centuries.

3.10 The only other definite evidence of medieval activity in the immediate vicinity comes from the discovery of the walrus ivory head of an abbatial crozier in the form of a tau cross (WA 535). It was dug up in 1873 in the Rectory garden and is dated variously from the 10th-12th century. Some of the features from the 1991 evaluation (WA 5837) were possibly medieval but absence of dating evidence makes their provenance uncertain.

4. Observation and Recording

4.1 The initial site clearance and the removal of topsoil in the area of the new house was carried out by a mechanical excavator. This was observed and the resulting spoil examined for any archaeological remains. No evidence for any archaeological activity predating the present century was observed. The only structure recorded was a rectangular 'trough' of brick and limestone construction which was presumably a recent garden feature.

4.2 The excavation of three trenches (Fig. 2), to take drains and wall foundations, and one square pit was subsequently observed and the resulting spoil again examined for archaeological remains. Where space allowed the trenches were dug by a mechanical excavator using a ditching bucket. Elsewhere the trenches were dug by hand.

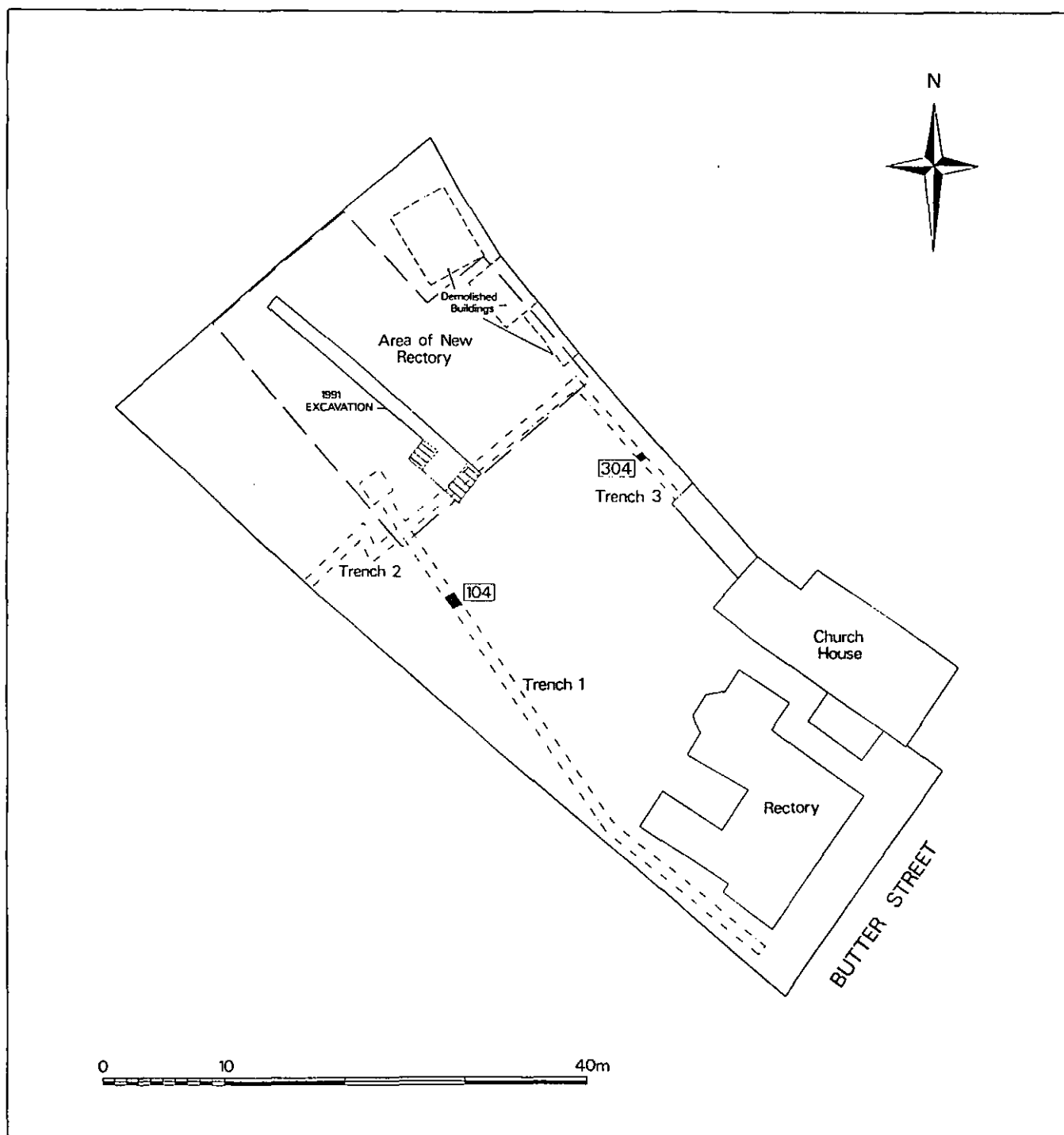


Fig. 2: Location of Trenches Observed

4.3 Trench 1 measured some 35m in length and ran north west-south east across the south west half of the area. It was between 1.05 and 1.15m in width and 0.65-0.75m deep. Overlying geological natural was a brown clay loam layer (103) only visible in the western end of the trench and containing Roman and post medieval material. About 4m from the north western end of the trench there was a wall of undressed sandstone blocks, with no mortar bonding, measuring c.1.10m wide and oriented roughly north east-south west (104). Only one course of stonework was visible. The wall is likely to be of Roman date. It was sealed by 0.75m of mixed garden soil (102) which continued to the east end of the trench from where were recovered many modern bricks, some 19th century pottery as well as a few Roman pottery sherds. Layer 102 was overlaid by topsoil (101).

4.4 Trench 2 measured some 25m in length and ran north east-south west across the north west part of the site. It was between 1.00m and 1.10m wide and 0.65m to 0.75m deep. The earliest layer was a brown clay/loam (203), similar to 103 in Trench 1, containing a few sherds of Roman and post medieval pottery. Above this was again a layer of mixed garden soil (202), containing some 19th century brick and pottery, in turn overlain by topsoil (201).

4.5 Trench 3 measured 12m in length and ran north-west, south-east across the north east part of the site. It was 0.80-0.90m wide and 0.75-0.90m deep. The earliest deposit uncovered was a layer of gravel and small pebbles which did not appear to be an occupation layer (303). At a distance of 4m from the eastern end of the trench this was overlain by a wall (304). It lay at a depth of only 0.35m below the present ground surface and was made up of three courses of mortar bonded, undressed, limestone blocks. At its highest point the wall stood to a height of 0.49m above the gravel and was orientated roughly north east-south west. Again the wall was possibly of Roman date. Although of a different type of construction to Wall 104 in Trench 1, the two stretches uncovered both ran north east-south west and were roughly in line with each other. Above the wall was a 0.50m layer of dark brown sandy/loam (302) which was itself sealed by a disturbed layer (301) containing much recent brick and floor tile derived from a shed which had once stood on the site.

4.6 As well as the three trenches the excavation of a pit to take a drainage pump was also observed. The pit was located 2m from the north western end of Trench 1. It measured approximately 1.50 by 1.50m and was 2.00m deep. The natural subsoil, an orange/brown clay, was exposed at the deepest part of the pit and at least four other garden soil layers were visible (401-404). However, the pit cut through no obvious features and no finds were recovered from it.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Evidence for Roman activity was recovered from all three of the trenches examined in the form of pottery, roof tile, and vessel glass fragments. Trenches 1 and 3 also revealed structural evidence of probable Roman date. This consisted of two walls, possibly belonging to one building, but more likely to two separate ones. Both walls ran north east-south west, respecting the line of the Roman defences known from earlier excavations to the north west.

5.2 It is possible that the structures fronted a road running just inside the Roman Town defences but no road surfaces survived to the north west in the trenches (nor in the evaluation trench). This may mean that they actually lay to the rear of a property or properties fronting a road to the south east.

5.3 In post medieval times (and presumably medieval as well, though no finds from that period were recovered) the area became the garden of a tenement running back from a building fronting onto Butter Street, the earth layers which overlay the Roman material representing the developing garden soil.

Acknowledgements

The Warwickshire Museum would like to thank Sibbasbridge Ltd for commissioning the work and Wood, Kendrick and Williams of Leamington Spa for supplying plans of the development. Work on site was carried out by Bryn Gethin and Daniel Hicks and this report written by Bryn Gethin and Christopher Jones with illustrations by Candida Stevens.

Appendix A: List of Finds

<i>Context</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Type/Date</i>	<i>No</i>
Trench 1			
101	Pottery	Post medieval	7
101	Shell	Oyster	2
102	Pottery	Post medieval	3
102	Pottery	Roman	2
102	Shell	Oyster	2
103	A.Bone		8
103	Brick	Post medieval	1
103	Glass	Ink Well	1
103	Glass	Roman vessel	1
103	Iron	Nails	3
103	Pottery	Post medieval	2
103	Pottery	Roman	5
103	Shell	Oyster	1
103	Tile	Roman	2
Trench 2			
201	A.Bone		1
201	Iron	Nail	1
201	Lead	Window lead	1
201	Pottery	Post medieval	2
201	Pottery	Roman	7
203	Pottery	Post medieval	2
203	Pottery	Roman	1
203	Tile	Roman?	1
Trench 3			
301	A.Bone		3
301	Pottery	Roman	2
301	Tile	Post medieval	1
302	A.Bone		3
302	Tile	Roman	4
304	Mortar		11

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