



**Herefordshire Archaeology**  
Conservation and Environmental Planning  
Planning Services  
Environment Directorate  
Herefordshire Council

# **Archaeological discoveries in the Stretton Grandison area**

## **Herefordshire Archaeology Report No .15**

Report prepared by  
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**Herefordshire Archaeology** is Herefordshire Council's county archaeology service. It advises upon the conservation of archaeological and historic landscapes, maintains the county Sites and Monument Record, and carries out conservation and investigative field projects. The County Archaeologist is Dr. Keith Ray.

# Archaeological discoveries in the Stretton Grandison area

Herefordshire Archaeology Report No.15 , December 2000. (Revised March 2004)

## **Summary:**

*Aerial photographs taken by Chris Musson during a sortie flown in 1999 as part of the Millennium Air Survey of Herefordshire resulted in a field visit. The photo appears to indicate the presence of a substantial bank and ditch around the south-east angle of the defences of either a previously undocumented fort, or the known Romano-British settlement here. Evidence of activity during the Roman period has been retrieved from a wide area adjacent to and in the middle of the floodplain of the River Frome, and straddling the boundary of the parishes of Ashperton, Canon Frome and Stretton Grandison. This is a point where a Roman road from Gloucester is crossed by one leading east from Kenchester.*

*A preliminary field visit focused on an area to the west of the Leominster-Gloucester road. On a subsequent occasion the opportunity was also taken to visit a site north of Stretton Grandison church. This was a hill-top site mentioned in the Victoria County History for Herefordshire, Volume 1 (1908).*

*A possible focus for the Roman roadside settlement was located, and the possible location of an antecedent Iron Age fort were defined as a result of these visits. However, the results of both visits were equivocal. It was concluded that only a more intensive and thorough exploration of the site by further survey and by site investigation works would be likely to reveal more about the nature of activity at this evidently important Roman road crossing and junction.*

**Disclaimer:** It should not be assumed that land referred to in this document is accessible to the public. Location plans are indicative only. NGR's are accurate to approximately 10m. Measured dimensions are accurate to within 1m at a scale of 1:500, 0.1m at 1:50, and 0.02m at 1:20.

Figures contain material from the Ordnance Survey. The grid in this material is the National Grid taken from the Ordnance Survey map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. This material has been reproduced in order to locate the site in its environs.

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# Archaeological discoveries in the Stretton Grandison area

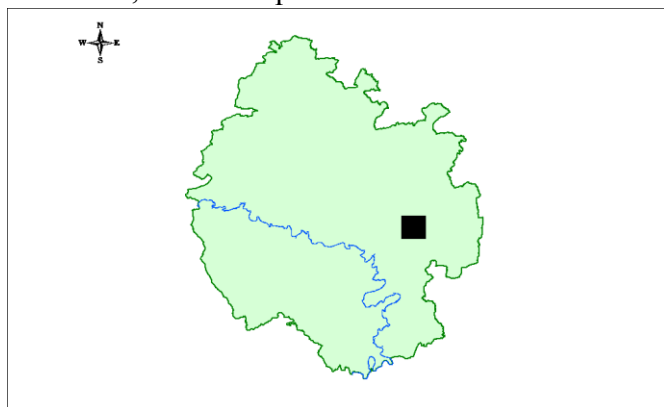
## Herefordshire Archaeology Report No.15

Herefordshire Archaeology, December 2000.

### *Introduction and background*

The 'Millennium Air Survey of Herefordshire' (MASH) was undertaken by Chris Musson on behalf of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club between 1998 and 2001. The Archaeological Research Section of the Club had carried out a Field Name Survey of Herefordshire, transcribing the field names marked upon the Tithe Award maps for the county of 1839-50. This project won a British Archaeological Award, and the prize money was used to sponsor an aerial survey project designed to document the Herefordshire landscape from the air at the Millennium, and to discover more archaeological sites. Copies of the photographic prints and slides produced by Chris Musson were purchased by the National Monuments Record (English Heritage), and by Herefordshire Archaeology (Herefordshire Council) for the county Sites and Monuments Record. As a consequence, photographs were logged (largely by volunteers, with checking by Rebecca Roseff, the Sites and Monuments Record Officer) onto the SMR as batches of photographs were received. Ruth Richardson (Hereford Sixth Form College archaeology tutor, and primary Woolhope Club representative for MASH) provided initial targets for survey. In consultation with Chris Musson, the author of this report also contributed suggestions for sites and features that might repay aerial survey. The latter process included meetings to review newly produced batches of photos, and correspondence concerning particular photos.

During the late summer of 1999, Chris Musson sent through to the author a series of prints specifically of aerial photos taken in July of that year of fields near Stretton Grandison, with a request for comment. These fields were located at the junction of the

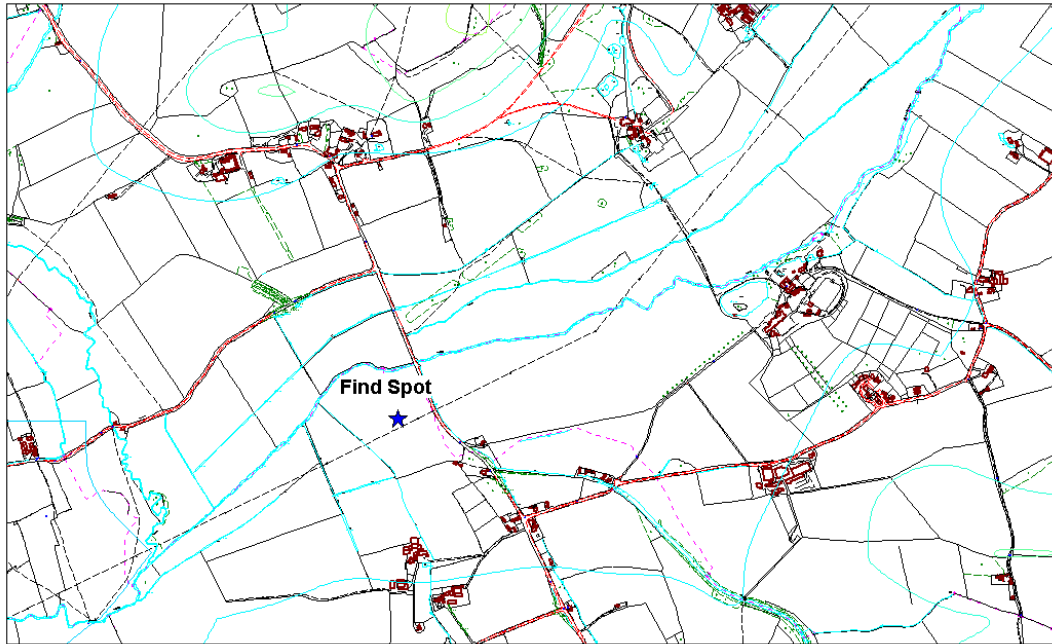


boundaries of three parishes (Ashperton, Canon Frome, and Stretton), and close to the river Frome (Figure 1). These photos have become in large measure the subject of this report, and will be commented upon extensively below.

**Figure 1: Site Location**

At the road crossing of the Frome valley between Stretton Grandison and Ashperton, but in part within the parish of Canon Frome, there had long been known to be a significant

Romano-British settlement (Figure 2). This was first discovered during the construction of the Gloucester to Hereford canal in the early nineteenth century. (Again, for further comment, see below).



**Figure 2: Location of Romano-British deposits identified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.**

In view of the scale of the earthwork shown on the aerial photograph, the possibility was considered that , rather than being a fort, the area enclosed might rather be the Romano-British settlement itself, or at least part of it. It was felt necessary to follow up this discussion with a field visit. Following an initial field visit and review of information in the Sites and Monuments Record, and from other sources, a further subsequent field visit was made in the autumn.

### ***Method***

The study discussed in this report comprised detailed study of the series of aerial photographs that documented the site in 1999, and a review of the aerial photographic record in the county Sites and Monuments Record. This was then followed up with a straightforward series of two site visits accompanied by Tim Hoverd, Archaeological Projects Officer (Herefordshire Archaeology), and ground-based field observations. The first occasion was in August 1999, immediately after the fields in this part of the Frome Valley had been harvested. The second occasion was in late November 2000, after leaf-fall and when the ground in woodland was easier to survey.

### ***Previous evidence for the Romano-British settlement at the crossing of the Frome***

This is summarised most effectively in the Central Marches Historic Towns survey report on Stretton Grandison (Buteux, 1996).

In 2000, Jean O'Donnell's March 1997 Woolhope Club Presidential Address was published in Volume XLIX, Part I of the Club's Transactions. The subject was 'Stretton Grandison: Settlement and Landscape', and the paper included a section outlining the evidence for Romano-British settlement. Both the Canon Frome fort was mentioned, and the site closer to the Roman road. A photograph reproducing one of the 1999 Musson aerial photographs was printed, and a list of finds (chiefly of Romano-British and imported continental pottery) was given from fieldwalking across the two sites. The article was accompanied by a plan (O'Donnell, 2000, Figure 1) showing approximate locations of relevant features and finds.

### ***Observations***

#### *Aerial photographs*

The 1999 series of aerial photographs (MASH-) show a prominent (at least 20m wide) ditch running north-south from the middle of field 7 (Tithe Map, Canon Frome, "*part of The Lawn*") by a present day electricity pylon, to a point to the east of The Lodge, just north of the present southern boundary fence for that field. At this point, the ditch turns a right-angle and appears to continue westwards towards the north-east corner of the curtilage of The Lodge. The photographs clearly indicate the course of the north-south Roman road that is traceable southwards in the landscape at least as far as Dymock on the river Leadon in Gloucestershire (c.15km). From the middle of the northern boundary of the curtilage, the road runs northwards across the field on a course that meets the existing road 100m or so north of Canon Frome Bridge. The metalling of the Roman road is clearly visible in the standing crop, northwards to a point where, almost parallel with the pylon, it disappears – presumably upon entering and being covered by alluvial deposits.

Other photographs in the SMR collection bear out the presence of this feature, but these photos provide important detail about the ditch concerned, and associated features. For instance, a narrow ditch located eastwards beyond the 20m wide ditch but entirely parallel with its course is evident all along the eastern part of the circuit. Moreover, there are traces of a further narrow ditch actually within the circuit of the 20m ditch, again mirroring its course.



**Figure 3: Aerial Photograph looking North.**

**(Ref: 99.MB.0765)**

The 1999 photographs also showed features in the field to the west of the road, through which the canal formerly passed. Here the canal had been built upon a substantial earthen causeway. These features could, with an optimistic eye, be read to suggest that a south-western angle of the same defences could be located within the field recorded as 44 on the Ashperton Tithe Map. This name, 'Blacklands', clearly gives rise to the eponymous farm, and is adjacent to The Wharf, the name of which clearly refers to one of the facilities on the former canal. Such names frequently denote the presence of dark soil often found associated with Romano-British towns.

Early in 2002, Chris Musson also sent through photographs from the final season of flying as part of MASH the previous year. These included a further photograph of field 7, and this does appear to indicate a return north-eastern angle to the defences in the same field as the south-eastern angle, and just to the north of the present-day pylon.

#### *Site visits*

At the time of the first site visit in late summer 2000, only the fields of Blacklands Farm, Ashperton, were accessible following the harvesting of the crop there. Our thanks are extended to the owners of the land for permission for access. However, other areas were

visible from the causeway on which the A417 Gloucester to Leominster road crosses the Frome.



**Figure 4: Aerial Photograph looking south.**

**(Ref: 99.MB.0766)**

At the time of the second site visit, the focus was upon the hill to the north of Stretton Grandison church. Here, the first feature observed was a series of two south-facing field lynchets immediately to the north-east of the churchyard (HSM 38478 -see database below). These lynchets are some 5m wide and slope from east to west as well as being cut back into the south-facing slope. The lower lynchet has had further structures, perhaps medieval houses or barns, located on its western end, occupying platforms cut into the lynchet itself.

Above this, at the lower western edge of the woodland on the south-facing flanks and summit of Homend Bank, there is a further massive lynchet (HSM 38479) descending the hillside obliquely from north-west to south-east. A further but smaller lynchet (HSM 38480) runs parallel to this massive lynchet, on the slope above it.

To the north-east of this and crossed by a public footpath, just above the 100m contour at SO63464423, there is a circular mound (HSM 38481) some 3m in diameter, apparently originally surrounded by a ditch. This feature only survives intact on the north and west sides of the mound, because a boundary bank with an intermittent ditch on its west side climbs the hill perpendicular to the slope, and passes close by the eastern side of the

mound. The path as well as the boundary has modified the form of the mound. The boundary continues a further 20m northwards to reach the top of the ridge and to meet the northern edge of the wood that here coincides with the parish boundary with Eggleton.

Some 50m further eastwards along the ridge and this time actually on its summit there is an oval mound (HSM 38482) measuring about 5m x 3m and aligned east-west along the line of the ridge. Currently a Scots Pine tree marks the location. Some 20m further east again, the ridge drops slightly before opening out into a wider hilltop. At the top of this slight incline there is a small ditch or linear notch (HSM 38483) that may mark a feature defining the eastern limit of a former enclosure here. However, the feature neither continues to the north into the arable field or southwards to the south-facing slope of the ridge – so at present it is anomalous. All of the features mentioned are plainly visible from the public footpath, and the woodland at Homend Bank would clearly replay full survey, if access can be arranged.

## ***Discussion and conclusions***

### *The physical evidence from finds*

The finds retrieved from the canal construction include a rich array of material. This is only likely to be a sample of what was actually found, and most of the finds have long since vanished. The wealth of the settlement is indicated by the two gold bracelets and by the imported pottery. The rare steelyard and weights indicate specifically the commercial activities conducted in the settlement.

The broad distribution of surface finds encouraged Buteux to define a wide area as containing the Romano-British settlement. The finds published by O'Donnell appear to derive from a single field wholly within Canon From parish that contains both the 'marching camp' (at the east end) and the fort/defended settlement (at the west end). Both Samian ware and later ceramics were retrieved there, along with building debris. On the other side of the road, where O'Donnell locates 'Epocessa', another assemblage of material was retrieved that is largely consistent with that to the east of the main road (O'Donnell, 2000, 26).

### *Reading the aerial photographs*

The new aerial photographic evidence has clearly established the presence of a large multiplex defensive feature defining the south-eastern corner of a defended area. This had previously been recorded, and had indeed presumably led to the definition of a protected area, Scheduled as an Ancient Monument. However, the level of detail visible on the photos is greater than hitherto (see below, 'Significance', for a discussion of the conservation implications).



### *Clues from place- and field-names*

The presence of the 'Blacklands' name is of interest in emphasising the scale of the area across which the phenomenon of black soil had at various times in the past been visible. However, it does not precisely locate the core area of Romano-British settlement. Of greater significance is the name 'Budbury'. This was noted as a location close by where the finds were made during construction of the canal. This was said to be where foundations were being dug when the canal bridge over the Frome was being built, and this enables the 'bury' to be located down near the river. The name means 'Budda's fort', and a 'Budbury' was a fort that survived as a visible earthwork located on the hill overlooking the river Avon at Bradford-on-Avon in Wiltshire into the nineteenth century. When excavated prior to a housing development in the 1970s, this was found to be Iron Age in date. The identification and significance of the Budbury enclosure at Canon Frome will be discussed below.

### *Clues in the landscape*

The walk-over visit in August 2000 led to a realisation that the 'south-eastern angle' defences visible on the 1999 aerial photos took best advantage of a local knoll that stands proud above the floodplain of the Frome here. This hillock is clearly defined by the 65m contour on the 1:25000 Ordnance Survey map.

Blacklands field has had chequered history since the nineteenth century. For instance, when the Gloucester-Hereford canal was built, perched on an aqueduct-like embankment as it headed for the Frome crossing, it bisected the field. In recent years this earthwork has been levelled. However, it is still possible to discern some topography within the field. The impression gained in the site visit was that there was indeed some (albeit subtle) difference in elevation between the eastern (higher) side and the western (lower) side of the field.

### *Interpretative possibilities at 'Stretton Grandison'*

There may have been an Iron Age enclosure on the hill above Stretton Grandison church to the north. There may even have been a precursor defended Iron Age settlement at 'Budbury' immediately south of the river. It is certain that there was a Roman military site to the west of Canon Frome church, designed to command this part of the valley. However, just what was going on around what became the Roman road crossing the river here is still far from certain.

A series of possibilities exist:

1. There was a successor Roman fort site located on the knoll to the south-east of the present day Canon Frome Bridge.
2. In this case, the Roman road was built to enter this fort obliquely from the south-east, close to its western defences.

3. The 'Blacklands' field to the west of the road would in this case represent a 'vicus' or extra-mural civilian settlement that grew up outside the fort.
4. Alternatively, the defences here were built after both the road and the settlement had been established.
5. In this case, the defences may not have taken in all the original settlement, and the skewed location of the bank and ditch circuit represents an attempt to secure the high ground of the knoll to the east, while enclosing as minimal area as possible.
6. A final possibility is that the road actually bisects the enclosed settlement area almost centrally, and that the western line of the defences was located well to the west of the present road, actually within 'Blacklands'.

### *The Canon Frome 'forts'*

The character of the double ditches and the nature of the corners of the cropmark long known at Canon Frome located just to the west of the church indicate that it should be counted as a fort. A circular or oval feature within the fort may be a feature of Neolithic date (the SMR has a reference to an axe-head recovered from the site). However, ditches set at oblique angles to the western defences are characteristic Roman military embellishments.

For the cropmark site in part occupying the knoll south-east of Canon Frome Bridge, there are a series of interpretative possibilities that encompass a military origin (see above). What would be needed to confirm this would be finds such as belt or harness mounts or other military equipment. A military origin cannot be inferred for instance entirely from finds of Samian ware, unless these are of a notably early date.

### *The nature of the 'Stretton Grandison' settlement*

In 2000, the present author became convinced that the features marking the south-eastern angle of defences in the 'knoll' area to the east of the road represented part of an otherwise unsuspected circuit of defences of a Romano-British small town or 'posting station' located here. This would place it as a defended roadside settlement in parallel with the site of *Branogenium* at Leintwardine in the far north of the county. It also seemed most likely that the defended area continued well to the north of the more southerly of the two main courses of the Frome locally, and that the settlement extended northwards at least as far as Canon Frome Bridge. This would have the benefit of placing the 'canal bridge finds' either within or immediately adjacent to the former defences.

Since then, the apparent evidence for a return of the 'knoll' defensive circuit westwards towards the road south-eastwards from Canon Frome Bridge has led to a reconsideration of the northern limit of the settlement. It now seems unlikely that this extended as far northwards as Canon Frome Bridge. Rather, the question has become whether it included the 'Blacklands' field to the west of the main road, and if so whether this was within or outside the circuit of defences.

This does not answer the case for a military interpretation of the ‘knoll’ defences, however. However, this is where a further piece of aerial photographic evidence is crucial to the interpretation. This is the evidence for a road branching off eastwards from the main Roman road, within the enclosed area, and towards the knoll. Moreover, this intra-mural road is not set at right-angles either to the defences or to the main road, but is instead set at an eccentric angle (Plate 3). This contradicts military practice, but is exactly paralleled in many of the smaller enclosed civilian settlements of Roman Britain.



**Plate 3: Looking north, showing the north/ south road and the eccentric road running to the east. (Ref: BUA 78)**

So, in this report at least, there is a ‘preferred’ interpretation that can now be put forward, as a provisional reading of the evidence. This contains the following elements:

- ◆ The site was never a Roman fort, and the main part of the settlement was focused between the knoll and the present course of the A417 road.
- ◆ This may well have originated as an Iron Age enclosure, and may indeed have influenced the direction of the Roman road northwards.
- ◆ The western line of the defences lay just to the west of the present A417, and its position has been marked by the parish boundary between Ashperton and Canon Frome as it proceeds northwards to the banks of the Frome.
- ◆ Indeed, this may also explain why the A417 deviates from the original course of the Roman road here. The aim may have been to climb up onto the western embankment

of the defences to keep to drier ground to approach as close as possible to the main river channels as the road headed for Stretton Grandison village to the north.

- ◆ It was therefore this enclosed Romano-British roadside settlement and local market centre, with its pronounced embanked and ditched defences, that became known locally as ‘Budbury’.
- ◆ ‘Blacklands’ to the west might originally have been part of the formerly un-enclosed settlement here, but was excluded when the defences were constructed.

This outline differs from the conclusions of the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey volume (Buteux, 1996) in that it attempts to define a core area for the settlement. It is important however to concur with the findings of that report inasmuch as it is clear that occupation debris associated with the settlement clearly covers a much wider area, and extends across the whole of the floodplain locally. To a considerable degree, the creation of an interpretation of this kind is premature (see below, ‘implications’).

The interpretation put forward here also provides a different reading of the evidence from that produced in Jean O'Donnell's study (O'Donnell, 2000). Although it is not spelled out in detail in the text, her Figure 1 clearly indicates that she envisages a fort area east of the A417, and the centre of ‘Epocessa’ to the west of that road and near to the southern channel of the Frome. As noted above, a preferred reading here is to see the settlement as spanning the A417, but with the defended area perhaps located entirely to the east of it.

#### *The features on the hilltop at Stretton Grandison*

On present evidence, the features on the hilltop by Homend Bank north of Stretton Grandison church cannot easily be interpreted in terms of a minor hillfort or other Iron Age enclosure. Unfortunately as yet there is no aerial photographic evidence for the field that covers much of the north-facing slope here, looking out towards Eggleton and Much Cowarne. It is possible that, in the past, the large south-west facing lynchet on the edge of the woodland here has been mistaken for the defensive bank of such an enclosure.

Before the growth of woodland here, the two earthen mounds would each have formed a skyline feature as seen from the Frome valley to the south. It is possible that they originated as Bronze Age (or indeed earlier) burial mounds. It is also possible, given the number of ‘-low’ (= OE ‘hlaw’, ‘hlaew’ – ‘tumulus, hill’; Gelling, 1984, 162-3) names locally, that they were created during the period of Anglian pagan settlement in the Frome/lower Lugg valley area in the late sixth/early seventh century. (A ring-ditch excavated at Sutton St. Michael in 2002 produced a sherd of pottery provisionally assigned to the seventh century)

However, other possibilities exist. One such is that one or both of them were sites for Romano-British pagan religious activity. A mound resulting from such activity was excavated in the 1960s at Croft Ambrey, Aymestrey – a location near a hill-top also near the river Lugg. It may or may not be coincidental that at Stretton Grandison it was a scoop on the side of Homend Bank that produced the find of the elaborate Roman pottery lamp.

### *Was the 'Stretton Grandison' settlement 'Epocessa'?*

While the Latin names of Leintwardine (*Branogenium*), Kenchester (*Magnis*), and Weston-under-Penyard/Bollitree (*Ariconium*) are reasonably well established (Rivet and Smith, 1983), names have not been clarified for either of the other so far definite substantial civilian settlements in the county at Blackwardine near Leominster and at 'Stretton Grandison'. The name books of the Antonine Itinerary and Ptolemy's Geography have defined a settlement called *Epocessa* or *Eposessa*, that could be in the Frome valley area, but at present there appears still to be some uncertainty as to whether it can reliably be attributed to Stretton Grandison (ibid, xx)

### ***Significance and implications***

Two of the areas discussed are already Scheduled as Ancient Monuments and are accepted as containing remains of national importance. However, as already noted, the Central Marches Historic Towns Survey report has already indicated that the whole area either side of the Roman road crossing contains remains that are of great potential value for the understanding of the nature of the 'small town' that once existed here.

One of the implications of the uncertainty that exists about the disposition and nature of settlement features here, is the recognition of a need for further, and concerted, fieldwork. Some measured survey in winter might help to define better the nature of the earthworks at Homend Bank. In the valley, a series of possibilities exist for further work, but they would ideally include:

- ◆ Further geomorphological study to follow up the results of a limited auger transect undertaken as part of the Herefordshire Valleys survey in 1996 (Dinn, 1998).
- ◆ Geophysical survey covering the site of the definite Canon Frome fort and the 'knoll' site. This would best be conducted using both resistivity and magnetometry.
- ◆ Geophysical survey of 'Blackfields', and other areas of the valley floor.
- ◆ Some limited site investigations to test the depth of deposits, nature of survival, and degree of threat from erosion.

### ***Acknowledgements***

Herefordshire Archaeology would like to acknowledge the help of the local landowners with enquiries and with permissions for access. For the original fieldwork, Jean O'Donnell kindly provided information in advance of publication of her Woolhope Club Transactions paper, for which the author is extremely grateful. Finally thanks are due to Chris Musson for providing the aerial photography in the first place, and for subsequent discussions (although I acknowledge that he still prefers to see the 'knoll' site as a fort), and to Tim Hoverd for assistance with the field visits.

## **Archive**

The archive comprises:

Aerial photographs from various collections, copies of which are held in the county SMR.

This report.

(No photographs were taken during the reconnaissance visits, and no notes made).

## **Further Publication**

Until 2004, no further publication was planned.

However, this was prior to the establishment of the LEADER+ Frome Valley Archaeology, Landscape Change and Conservation Project. This is led by Herefordshire Archaeology in partnership with the Bromyard and District Local History Society. The Frome Valley project is funded by the LEADER+ Herefordshire Rivers Local Action Group (financed by DEFRA and the European Union), and by grant-aid from English Heritage. The project Director is Paul White, Landscape Archaeologist with Herefordshire Archaeology.

It is not clear (April 2004) what site-based archaeological field investigations, if any, will take place in the 'Stretton Grandison' Romano-British settlement area. However, the project work will include landscape-based archaeological survey, and geomorphological research that will seek to clarify the present and former courses of the River Frome throughout the valley. This will inevitably lead to the discovery of new information about the Stretton Grandison area, and further review of the evidence discussed in this report.

## **Data base**

SMR No	Grid Reference	Description
HSM 38478	63284413	Two lynchets each 5m wide. Lower lynchet has building platform at western end.
HSM 38479	63394427	Large lynchet on north-west / south-east
HSM 38480	63424429	Small lynchet parallel to 38479
HSM 38481	63464423	Circular mound approx. 3m in diameter surrounded by a ditch
HSM 38482	63474450	Oval mound approx. 5m long and 3m wide aligned east/west
HSM 38483	63514445	Short length of ditch approx. 2m wide.

## **References**

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Gelling, M. 1984. *Place-Names in the Landscape*. London: Dent.

O'Donnell, J. 2000. 'Stretton Grandison: Settlement and Landscape' (1997 Presidential Address). *Transactions of the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club*, Volume XLIX, Part I, 13-27.

### **Validation**

Herefordshire Archaeology operates a validation system for its reports, to provide quality assurance and to comply with Best Value procedures.

This report has been checked for accuracy and clarity of statements of procedure and results.

Julian Cotton. Archaeological Advisor.

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**SMR Recording Form**

<b>SMR No.</b>	<b>Monument or Event</b>	<b>Cross Ref.</b>	<b>Hard Copy Filed Under</b>
<b>Site Name:</b>		<b>Parish:</b>	
<b>Height OD</b>	<b>Approx area of site (Ha)</b>	<b>Map 1:10,000</b>	<b>Grid Ref.</b>
<b>Geology/Soils/Aspect/Topography:</b>			
<b>Date and Description of Observation Work (Event):</b>			
<b>Reason for work taking place:</b>			
<b>General Description of Features Found:</b>			
<b>Period Specific:</b>		<b>Site Type Specific:</b>	
<b>Form, ie current state of site</b> (eg buried remains, documentary, cropmark, folklore)			
<b>Finds: (Material)</b>			
<b>Finds: (Description)</b>			
<b>Finds No.</b> (take from computer)			



