

CPAT Report No 1208

Oswestry School Sports Pitch, Shropshire

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Client name: Oswestry School, Upper Brook Street, Oswestry, Shropshire.
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Cover photo: Medieval stone-filled ditch uncovered during topsoil stripping.
(CPAT 3628-0019)

Contents

Summary

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Watching Brief
- 3 Conclusions
- 4 Acknowledgements
- 5 Sources
- 6 Appendix 1

Summary

In March 2013 the Contracts and Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust carried out an archaeological watching brief during the initial works for a new all-weather sports pitch located at the school playing fields, Maes-y-Llan, on the outskirts of Oswestry in Shropshire. The work was undertaken on behalf of Oswestry School, Upper Brook Street.

A number of linear features of 13th/14th-century origin were identified, together with upstanding earthworks in the form of a lynchet and holloway. It has been assumed that the features are in some way contemporary with the dwellings and the associated field systems that had been noted in previous archaeological work undertaken by Shropshire Archaeological Services (Hannaford 1993).

No artefactual remains were recovered during the watching brief. Consequently there is no further evidence to qualify the area as the possible site of the battle of Maeserfleth, fought in 642 between Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, and Penda, the pagan ruler of Mercia.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In March 2013 the Contracts and Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust was invited by Oswestry School, Upper Brook Street, Oswestry, Shropshire, to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the construction of a new all-weather sports pitch with floodlighting located at the school playing fields, Maes-y-Llan (Fig. 1; SJ 2847 2893). The watching brief was a condition of planning consent and a brief (Application No. 12/04437/FUL) detailing the required work had been prepared by Dr Andy Wigley, Principal Archaeologist of the Shropshire Archaeological Service.

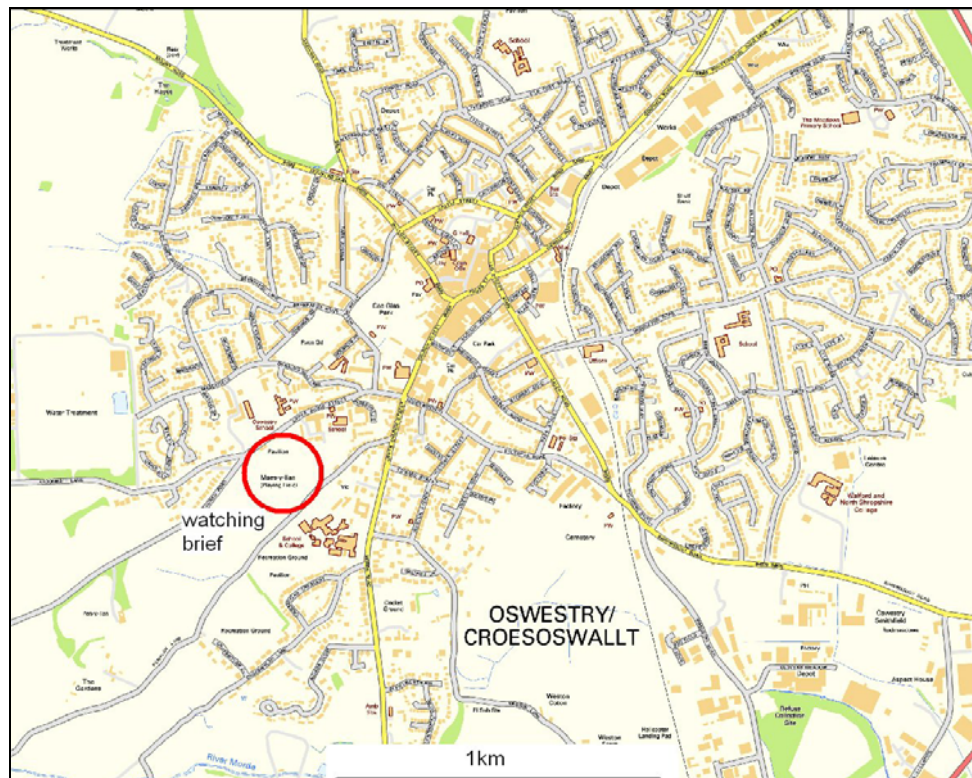


Fig. 1 The Development Area; Oswestry School Sports fields, Maes-y-Llan.

- 1.2 The development is located at Maes y Llan (meaning ‘the church field’ in Welsh), which is held locally to be the site of the battle of Maeserfleth, fought in 642 between Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, and Penda, the pagan ruler of Mercia, the battle ending in the defeat and martyrdom of Oswald. More recently, a number of scholars, amongst them the late Margaret Gelling, the leading authority on Shropshire place-names, have questioned this belief, and there are at least two other claimed sites for the battle, in Lancashire and Gloucestershire. Gelling was of the opinion that the identification of Oswestry was due to a medieval confusion between *Maserfleth* and *Meresbyrig* (Maesbury) and a mis-translation of *Oswaldestre* as ‘Oswalds Cross’. Moreover, the Shropshire Historic Environment Record, based on work by Michael Watson, places the battlefield further to the north, between Oswald’s Well and the Church of St. Oswald.
- 1.3 In 1993 a range of earthworks were identified during an archaeological field evaluation at the south-western end of the playing field (labelled ‘a’ – ‘k’, Fig. 2). These included the remains of potential field boundaries (HER PRN 04626), possible house platforms (HER PRN 04627), and a rectangular enclosure (HER PRN 04628), all of probable medieval, or early post-medieval date. These features will not be directly affected by the proposed development, although it should be noted that the study area in 1993 did not include the current proposed

development site. Additional examination of digital aerial photographs and Environment Agency LiDAR data held within the HER indicated that a number of earthwork features existed within an adjacent field or immediately south-west of the proposed development site. It has been suggested that these are also likely to represent pre-18th-century field boundaries. The LiDAR data suggested that these may originally have extended onto the site itself, although they have been partially levelled during previous landscaping of the playing fields. One element of the proposed watching brief was to consider the possibility of below ground archaeological remains relating to these earthworks.

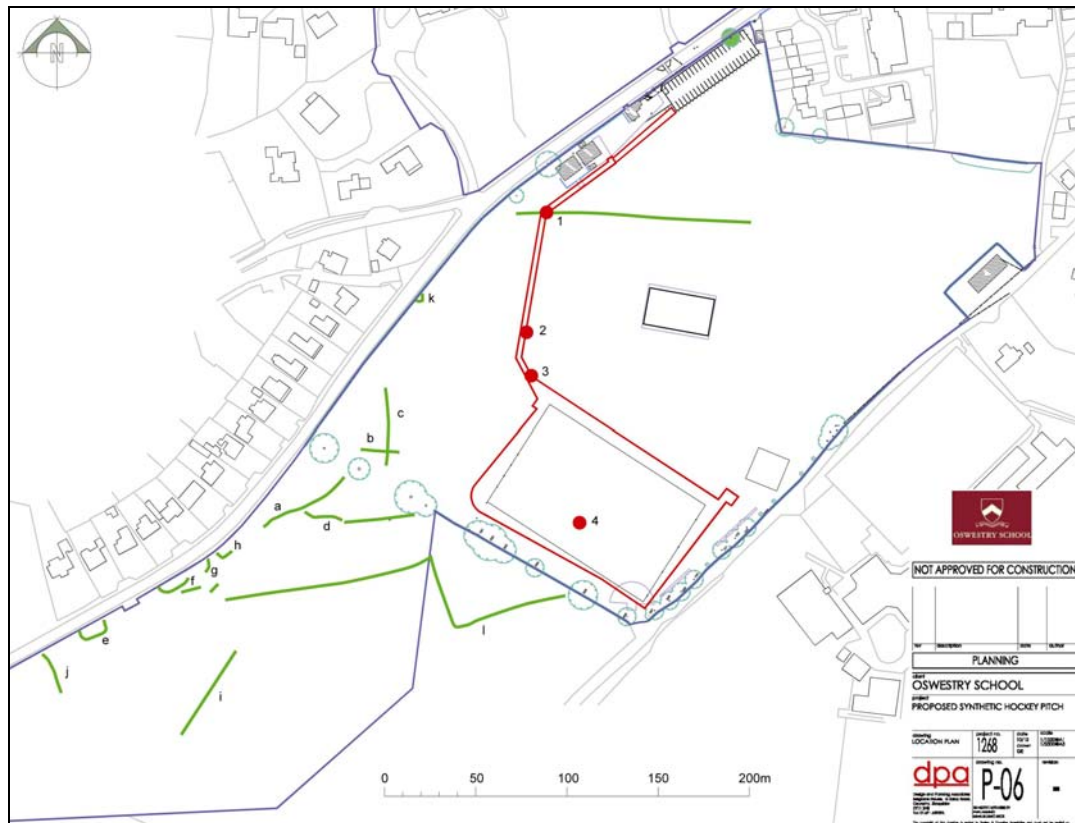


Fig. 2 Plan of archaeological earthwork features (Hannafor 1993) with additional features (1-4 and 'l') resulting from studies associated with the watching brief.

- 1.4 The watching brief described here was carried out during the topsoil stripping and ground reduction phase of the work, between 24th and 30th April 2013, and this report written immediately thereafter.

2 Watching Brief

- 2.1 The watching brief consisted of two phases: (a) the topsoil stripping and construction of an access road and (b) the topsoil stripping and subsequent ground reduction of the area designated as the site of the new sports pitch. The construction of the access road, up to 4m wide and generally stripped to a depth of up to 0.35m, was quickly followed by the laying of hardcore stone, affording only limited opportunity to examine potential archaeological features. Consequently, remains of relict field boundaries of probable post-medieval origin were merely noted, sampled for dateable finds and located with GPS mapping.
- 2.2 The access road was machine stripped using a ditching bucket and as a consequence archaeological remains were easier to identify. However the much larger area designated for the new sports pitch was stripped and levelled down using bladed tracked bulldozers, and subsequently archaeological remains were generally difficult to identify and were restricted to collections of spot surface finds in the form of pottery fragments.
- 2.3 During the watching brief two further earthworks were identified, both located beyond the previous study area (Hannaford 1993). The first was a broad bank (lynchet) orientated west to east and 1m high with a 1m wide ditch along the south side (Fig. 2, no. 1, NGR SJ 28427 29110). The second earthwork, located beyond the site development to the south-west, was a broad 'holloway' 4m wide by 1m deep. The curving linear (labelled '1' on Fig.2 and illustrated below in Fig. 3) pre-dates the overlying 19th-century field system.



Fig. 3 View of sunken holloway (labelled '1' on Plan – Fig. 2), south-west of the development area. Photo CPAT 3628-0008.

- 2.4 Two other linear features were recorded along the line of the access route. Firstly, a shallow 0.5m-wide gully followed the line of the excavations, north to south (no. 2 Fig. 2 and illustrated below Fig.4). The gully, which appeared to be intermittent with breaks of approximately every 10m, had been heavily truncated by modern ground improvements, but survived to a depth of 0.3m. Numerous fragments of 13th/14th century pottery (specifically from an area centred on NGR SJ 28414 29049) were recovered from the gully's single fill of stiff dark grey silty clay. The medieval pottery, together with all other finds recovered from across the site, is detailed in section 2.5 of this report. The other recorded linear feature (no. 3, Fig. 2), a broad stone-filled ditch 1.3m wide and orientated east to west, had a depth in excess of 0.5m (NGR SJ 28417 29022). The feature, which was only partially excavated, contained

stone cobbles (all of a fairly uniform size) and charcoal set within a matrix of stiff light brown silty clay from which a number of sherds of unglazed medieval pottery were recovered (Fig.5).



Fig. 4 Medieval gully located along the access road. Viewed from the south, with the cricket pavilion in the background. Photo CPAT 3628-0013.



Fig. 5 Medieval stone-filled ditch. Photo CPAT 3628-0016

- 2.5 After completion of the access route, the watching brief focussed upon the ongoing strip and ground reduction of the designated area of the new sports pitch. As previously noted in 2.1, monitoring conditions were particularly difficult because of the type of machinery used and the nature of the groundworks (Fig. 6). However, at least one feature, the remains of a roughly cobbled 'yard' surface, was recorded on the upper east facing slopes (no. 4, Fig.2 NGR SJ 28440 28940). Within the general vicinity a number of sherds of pottery were

recovered, ranging in date from the late 17th century to the late 18th century. In addition, within 20m of this area, a small quantity of 13th/14th-century medieval pottery was also recovered. No further features of archaeological significance were recorded.



Fig. 6 View of the proposed sports pitch site during ground reduction groundworks.
Photo CPAT 3628-0026

The Finds

- 2.6 The earliest dateable finds recovered during the watching brief were pottery sherds of 13th/14th-century date. A few surface finds were retrieved from the general ploughsoil, possibly attesting to manuring of the fields during the medieval period through to the 19th century. However, the majority of the medieval pottery was recovered from the narrow (0.5m-wide) gully that ran north to south along the route of the access road. The pottery, which is fairly representative of other medieval pottery recovered from the stone-filled ditch (no.3) and the upper slope of the new sports pitch (no.4), was generally light orange and buff in colour and was manufactured from 'low-fired' fairly sandy/gritty regional clays. Some sherds had traces of olive and light green lead glaze. The small assemblage from the gully (15 sherds in total) contained rim and body fragments of jugs, jars and cooking pots together with strap handles and one thumb-impressed base from a jar or tankard.
- 2.7 The pottery from the general topsoil along the access route, specifically from the general area around the pavilion, can be dated to the late 18th and 19th centuries. Fabric types are predominantly black and brown-glazed Buckley and Staffordshire wares, manufactured in red coal measures clay. A few clay-pipe stems, of similar date, were also recovered. The post medieval pottery recovered from the upper slopes of the sports pitch was of a slightly earlier 17th/18th-century origin. Typical fabric types included early slipware and later 18th-century trailed slipware together with black/brown glazed finewares and clay-pipe stems. A single sherd of early 19th-century pearlware was also recovered.
- 2.8 Apart from the occasional square-sectioned iron nail, the only metal object recovered during the excavations is what appears to be the upper part of a single-edged iron knife or domestic cleaver with a short tanged handle. Alternatively the object, believed to be post-medieval in date, may be of agricultural origin or possibly even the remains of a door/gate latch.

3 Conclusions

- 3.1 The linear gully and ditch features recorded during the watching brief are, based on the artefactual evidence, of 13th/14th-century medieval date. The location of these features places them directly south-east and downhill of a known house platform site, surveyed in 1993 (Hannaford 1993). It can therefore be assumed that the features are in some way contemporary with the dwelling and the associated field systems that have been noted along the upper slopes of Maes-y-llan, adjacent to the Trefonen Road. Other surface pottery finds of similar date possibly indicate manuring of the soil in the medieval period and this may imply that the area formed part of the arable fields of the Oswestry township at that time.
- 3.2 The general east to west orientation of the upstanding earthworks, the lynchet and holloway, together with the ditch and gully, indicate the survival of archaeological remains relating to an earlier field system predating the 19th century. However, the holloway (labelled '1', Fig. 2) that lies south-west beyond the development site could, alternatively, be the remnant of an enclosure.
- 3.3 No artefactual remains were recovered during the watching brief that could relate to an early medieval conflict. Consequently there is no further evidence to qualify the area as the possible site of the battle of Maeserfleth, fought in 642 between Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, and Penda, the pagan ruler of Mercia.

4 Acknowledgements

- 4.1 The writer would like to thank the following for their assistance during the project: Nigel Jones, Bob Silvester, CPAT; Philip Bowd, Oswestry School; Dr Andy Wigley, Principal Archaeologist, Archaeology Service, Shropshire, and O'Brians for their co-operation and assistance during the on site groundworks.

5 Sources

Unpublished sources

Hannaford, H R, 1993. *An Archaeological Evaluation at Maes-y-Llan, Oswestry, Shropshire*. Archaeology Service, Shropshire County Council. Report No. 34

Cartographic sources

1838 Tithe survey for Oswestry Parish
1901 Ordnance Survey 25" 2nd edition Shropshire 12.14

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT ARCHIVE

Site records

5 Watching Brief record forms
28 digital photographs, CPAT film 3628
Photographic register

Finds

Medieval Pottery Catalogue
Miscellaneous Finds Catalogue
Post Medieval Pottery Catalogue

To be retained by the client: Oswestry School, for internal display purposes.

Medieval Pottery Catalogue

Find No.	Context/Location	Form	Sherd	Comment	Date (century)
1	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jug/Jar	2	Strap Handle, Olive splashed glazed orange sandyware	c.13/14th
2	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jug/Jar	1	Fragment of Strap Handle, Olive splashed glazed orange sandyware	c.13/14th
3	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jug/Jar	1	Rim. unglazed orange sandyware	c.13/14th
4	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Cooking pot	1	Body sherd fragment of unglazed black/grey sandyware	c.13/14th
5	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jug/Jar	1	Thumb-impressed decorated base. Trace of olive glaze. orange sandyware	c.13/14th
6	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jug/Jar	1	Fragment of shoulder/neck. Olive glazed (possibly salt tempered) orange sandyware	c.13/14th
7	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jar	1	Base fragment. Unglazed orange sandyware	c.13/14th
8	Fill of gully. SJ 28414 29049	Jug/Jar	7	Assorted fragments of body sherds of orange sandywares. Some olive splashed glazed.	c.13/14th
9	Fill of stone filled ditch. SJ 28417 29022	Jug/Jar	5	Assorted fragments of body sherds of orange sandywares. Some olive splashed glazed. 1 fragment of Thumb-impressed decorated base.	c.13/14th
10	Surface finds from the Sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Jug/Jar	11	Assorted fragments of body sherds of orange sandywares. Some olive splashed glazed. includes 1 rim fragment and 1 base fragment.	c.13/14th

Miscellaneous Finds Catalogue

Find No.	Context/Location	Material	No.	Comment	Date (century)
11	Topsoil strip near the pavilion.	Clay pipe	5	Fragments of clay pipe stems. 1 marked 'Broseley'	c. 18/19th
12	Topsoil strip, sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Clay pipe	8	Fragments of clay pipe stems.	c.18/19th
13	Surface find near the pavilion.	Iron	1	Square-sectioned nail. medieval/post medieval	c. 13/18 th ?
14	Topsoil strip, sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Iron	1	Fragment of single-edged domestic knife/cleaver with tanged handle?	c. 16/19 th ?

Post Medieval Pottery Catalogue

Find No.	Context/Location	Form	Sherd	Comment	Date (century)
15	Topsoil strip near the pavilion.	Various	8	Buckley/Staffordshire black & brown glazed wares. 1 base, 2 rims, 1 lug handle, 3 body. Manufactured from 'red coal measures' clay. Mostly hire-fired. 1 body sherd of 'mottled ware' manufactured from 'buff coal measures clay'.	c. 18/19 th
16	Topsoil strip near the pavilion.	Plate	1	Sherd of 'Buckley' slipware manufactured from 'red coal measures' clay.	c.18/19 th
17	Topsoil strip of the sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Plate	2	Fragments from different plates of 'Trailed Slipware'. Buckley or Staffordshire ? Manufactured from 'buff coal measures clay'.	c.18/19 th
18	Topsoil strip of the sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Plate	1	Blue 'Pearlware' plate fragment.	early c.19 th
19	Topsoil strip of the sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Various	3	Rim, body and base fragments of Buckley black & brown glazed finewares. Manufactured from 'red coal measures' clay. Hire-fired.	c. 18 th
20	Topsoil strip of the sports pitch. SJ 28440 28940	Plate	1	Slip-decorated plate fragment. Manufactured from 'red/orange coal measures clay'.	c. 17 th