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An Archaeological Evaluation at

The Butts, Wall, Staffordshire

By I.M. Ferris and J. Sterenberg

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Introduction

The nucleus of the present day village of Wall in south Staffordshire (SK 0906) stands towards the bottom of a hill, a quiet refuge from the noise and fumes of the nearby A5. The village partly overlies the Roman settlement of LETOCETUM about which relatively little is known considering the amount of previous archaeological investigation that has taken place in the area (summarised in SCC 1987).

In May 1988 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Mr. W.J. Ryman, the landowner, to carry out an archaeological evaluation of the area known as The Butts in advance of proposals for its development (Figure 1). The plot is currently in use as a cottage garden, and lies c. 25 metres to the east of the Roman stone bath-house in the guardianship of English Heritage.

The Evaluation Trenches

The purpose of the evaluation was to examine, in selected areas, the depth of deposits accumulated above the natural subsoil, and to identify any areas where archaeological features might survive or could be expected to be present. In order to accomplish this, and to gain the maximum possible information with a minimum of disturbance to the area involved, four trenches were dug (see Figure 1) mainly around the border of the present garden where late intrusions might least be expected.

The archaeological features encountered in these trenches were recorded in plan but only partially excavated once their nature had been satisfactorily defined; it was the purpose of the trenching to evaluate the archaeological potential of any surviving remains rather than to excavate them fully.

The largest intervention, Trench 4, along the whole length of the eastern portion of the area and closest to the English Heritage monument, was dug by a JCB earthmoving machine. It was stepped considerably towards its southern end to provide a section through an approximately 0.75 metres depth of natural subsoil, both to confirm its identity and to eliminate any possibility of any artificial origin or redeposition. In Trench 4 the total depth of deposits between the upper surface of the natural and the present day ground surface was c. 0.75 metres. This consisted mainly of a dark sandy loam garden soil (1000) that was recorded in all the trenches, overlying a 4 - 5 centimetres-thick deposit of more mixed and leached loam with charcoal inclusions and smears (1001) which here, and again in the other trenches, directly overlay the natural (1002). Towards the southern end of the trench a huge pit (F4) was cut from within the garden soil, lying only partly within the area of excavation, and over 1 metre in depth. The pit was backfilled with a dark sandy silt (1004) and huge quantities of smashed and slivered sheet glass (Figure 2); this was quite obviously a builder's dump of recent origin as indicated by the inclusion of a bicycle lamp in the backfill. At the northern end of Trench 4 was a very shallow butt-ended trench (F3), cutting 1001, and backfilled with mixed, silty sands (1003, 1005); the level of root activity noted in section suggests this to have been a former plant bedding trench (Figure 2). In sum, neither the north end of the trench nor the sections reveal any activity here earlier than the modern period.

Along the northern boundary of the garden were dug by hand two trenches, Trench 2 to the east, and Trench 1 further to the west (Figure 1). Trench 2 revealed a similar sequence and depth of soils to that already described above for Trench 4, although in this instance five heavily abraded sherds of Roman grey ware pottery were recovered from garden soil (1000). The sequence in Trench 1, however, was very different. Here the natural was found at a depth of 1.10 metres, the garden soil (1000) still being approximately the same thickness but the make-up horizon (1001) beneath was here much thicker, at c. 0.30 metres. Sealed by 1001 was the cut for a pit (F5), in which, during the removal of the upper fills of mixed clean sandy silts (1006, 1007), the lines of other cuts became apparent (Figure 3). This feature was only partially

excavated but its fill indicated that it was Roman in date. From it were recovered c. 30 sherds of Roman pottery, a single sherd of 17th-century blackglaze in the upper fill being probably intrusive but nonetheless indicating a terminus for layer 1001 which sealed the cut of the pit. Much of the Roman pottery is heavily abraded and had doubtless been lying around for some considerable time before its backfilling into the pit. The latest identifiable sherd was a Nene Valley colour coat of the late 2nd or early 3rd century, but this too exhibits signs of heavy wear around the breaks. A number of Roman pot sherds were also present in 1001, though none in 1000, which suggests that cultivation digging had never here been sufficiently deep to disturb the Roman feature below.

The fourth trench, in the central southern part of the garden, Trench 3, revealed a sequence and depth of deposits more or less identical to that in Trenches 2 and 4.

Thus, while to the east of the area under consideration there is no evidence for activity other than of the post-medieval period, Trench 1 reveals that there is some, as yet incompletely defined, survival of Roman features and deposits in the west. The marked difference in levels between east and west, in tandem with the area's position on the lower slopes of a hillside, suggests that a terrace has been cut into the slope (the cut, aligned approximately north-south, lying somewhere between Trench 2 and Trench 1) to provide a level surface. The cutting of this terrace would appear to have truncated the pit F5, and it may be that the 17th-century sherd in the upper fill of this feature, and sealed by 1001, dates this landscaping activity.

Summary and Recommendations

Evaluation by trenching revealed some evidence, primarily in the form of a pit, for a Roman presence in the area, but in view of the peripheral position of the site in relation to the main focus of Roman activity at Wall this may not be indicative of the presence of buildings or structures. The small amount of Roman pottery recovered in toto was not sufficient to

suggest the intensive use of this area despite its proximity to known stone buildings. The archaeology hints at a substantial terracing operation having taken place in or around the 17th century, which would have destroyed much of the evidence for earlier activity or occupation. Later activity on this site can presumably be associated for the most part with horticulture or gardening.

Arising from this evaluation the following archaeological conclusions and recommendations are proposed:

1. An episode of post-medieval terracing appears to have destroyed most, if not all earlier remains east of a line somewhere between Trenches 1 and 2. The small amount of Roman pottery present in late contexts anyway suggests a strictly limited level of activity here in the Roman period.
2. Some archaeology apparently survives in the western part of the site, albeit truncated.
3. In the event of development requiring deep foundations penetrating more than 0.75 metres below the modern surface there appears to be a low risk to archaeological features or deposits.
4. Should the excavation of foundations or other works exceeding 0.75 metres depth be unavoidable, an archaeological watching brief should be maintained during these works to salvage and record features and deposits which may yet be encountered on any part of the site.

References

SCC 1987. The Archaeology of Roman Letocetum. Staffordshire County Council. County Planning and Development Department.

Survey Staff

The evaluation was supervised by Jon Sterenberg. Survey staff were Laurence Jones, Edward Newton and Steve Litherland. Assistance also came from Clare Grove and Roy King. The text was edited by Peter Leach and Liz Hooper and typed by Ann Humphries. For advice on site many thanks to Frank and Nancy Ball.

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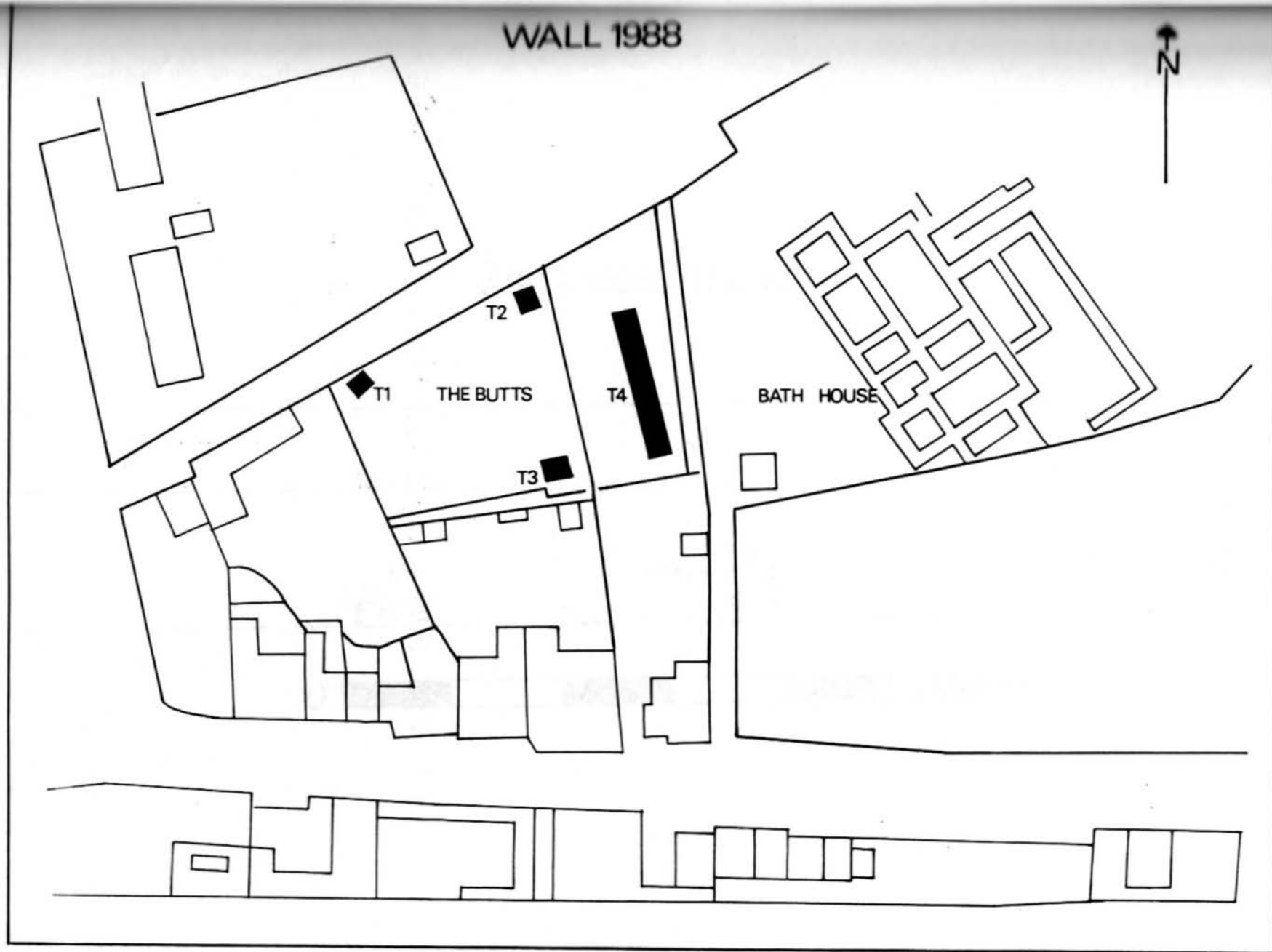
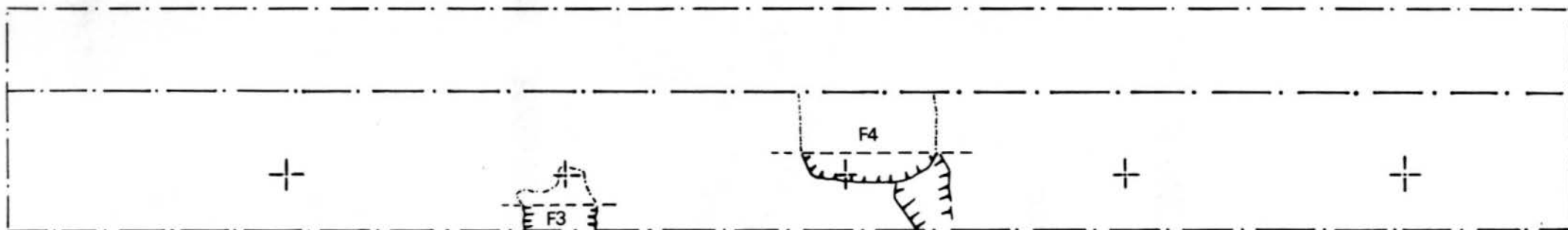
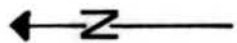


Figure 1: Location of Excavated Trenches

WALL 1988. TRENCH 4



0  5Metres

Figure 2: Trench 4. Plan of Features F3 & F4

WALL 1988.TRENCH 1

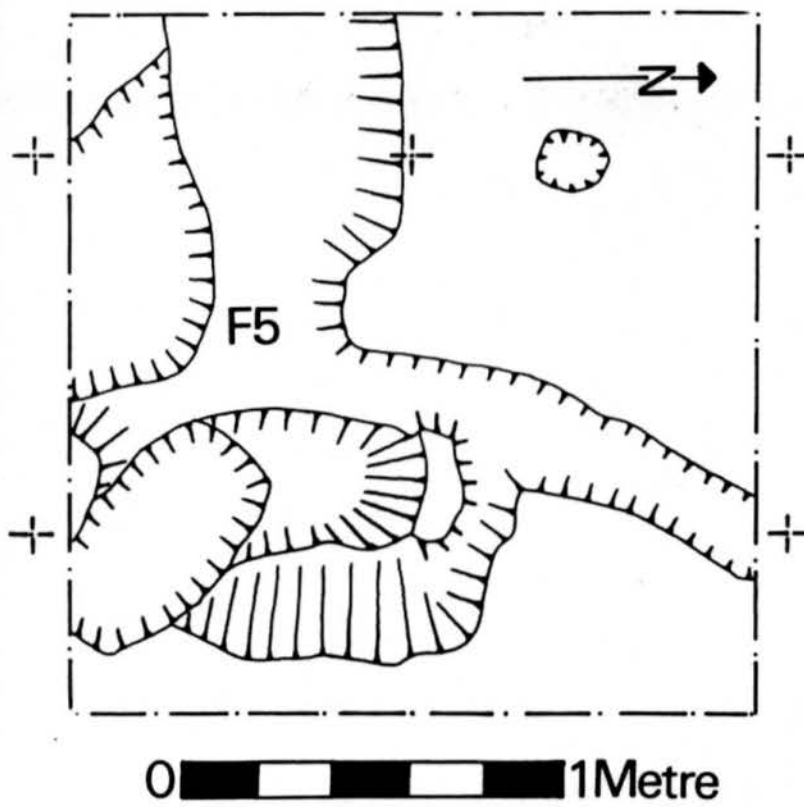


Figure 3: Trench 1. Plan of Pit F5, partially excavated.