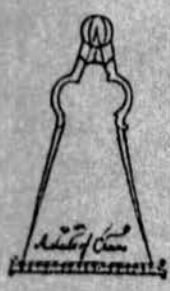


METCHLEY, BIRMINGHAM

an archaeological evaluation

1988



an interim report
by Alex Jones

B.U.F.A.U.



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An Archaeological Evaluation 1988

Interim Report

Including proposals for further excavation

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1.0: INTRODUCTION

Following earthmoving in late summer 1988, preliminary to the construction of a new hospital in the Queen Elizabeth Health Centre, Edgbaston, Birmingham, an archaeological evaluation was initiated by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit to investigate the archaeological potential of an area of ca. 4000m², threatened by the development. The area evaluated is outside the Western Ramparts of the Metchley Roman Forts, (St Joseph and Shotton, 1937), centred upon NGR. SP04108360 (Figure 1A). A further extensive area outside the forts and located within the development, was covered by up to 2m of modern landfill during the earthmoving and was excluded from the scope of the evaluation.

The archaeological evaluation was effected initially to locate the source of a scatter of heat-cracked stone located by Dr. L.H. Barfield of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, Birmingham University. Further systematic fieldwalking was followed by the excavation of sondages (Figure 1C), and the opening of an extensive area (Area I) to define the excavated burnt mound in plan. A speculative trench (Area II) was cut at 90 degrees to the valley floor to examine the nature and sequence of water-lain deposits, and seek evidence of Roman occupation in the area outside the ramparts.

The majority of the fieldwork was undertaken in November and December 1988 by the author, with some occasional volunteer help at weekends.

The following report presents an interim assessment of the archaeological results, and the implications of the impending development for the survival of the known deposits. A more completely researched report on the results of this excavation will be prepared for publication in due course.

2.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING.

The area affected by the development comprises a small valley bisected by marshy ground, the former course of a stream (Figure 1B) draining water from natural springs higher in the valley to the Bourn Brook. A depth of ca. 7m of sands and gravels deposited during the Pleistocene, was revealed in a contractor's borehole within the site. Removal of grass cover and ca. 0.3m of topsoil revealed a scatter of heat cracked stones on the machined surface close to a water source, suggesting the proximity of a burnt mound. Such sites normally comprise a raised mound up to 20m in diameter and 0.5m in height, containing heat-shattered stones set in a

matrix of charcoal-rich soil. Often in association is a hearth, where stone was heated on a wood fire before being placed in a trough, generally cut into natural, bringing its water content to the boil and generating a quantity of steam. The sites may be dated to the Late Bronze Age, and have been interpreted as bathing or cooking sites. A survey in the South Birmingham area has established the factors affecting the distribution of the mounds, but there have been regrettably few opportunities for detailed examination by controlled archaeological excavation.

Metchley fort lies at an important Roman military crossroads (Figure 1A), linking roads from Droitwich and Alcester to the south, and Wall to the north (Webster, 1981), (Figure 1A), but the precise alignment of the roads approaching Metchley remains to be determined. Entrances have been located by excavation in the middle of the northern side of the Inner Fort, and ca. 30m south of Vincent Drive on the west side (St. Joseph and Shotton, 1937) (Figure 1B). Excavations conducted exclusively on the line of the ramparts and within the defended area, have proposed a sequence and characterised the occupation. The larger fort (Figure 1B), of which the north west corner survives reconstructed in a scheduled area, comprises a double ditched enclosure of 10.5 acres with an earth rampart, and was first occupied around 45 AD; later an annexe was added on the north side (Figure 1B). In the final phase of occupation, after slighting of the earlier defences, a fort of single ditch and rampart enclosing 6.5 acres was constructed within the former, occupied perhaps until around 120-130 AD, (Rowley, 1969).

Much of the area remained an open space until the 18th Century, when a Hunting Lodge (Cover) occupied part of the Fort's area. The network of field drains discovered during the evaluation were probably laid while the land was used for arable farming, which only recently ceased.

3.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS.

3.1: Area I.

Surface scatters of burnt stone encountered during fieldwalking were plotted, and using this locational information a series of 1m square sondages were dug to locate the burnt mounds from which the stones originated. A secondary aim was the examination of the sequence of deposits surrounding the waterlogged area. A burnt mound was located and an area 8m by 4.5m was opened by hand (Area I)(Figure 1C).

The earliest evidence for man's activity comprised a group of shallow scoops cut into the natural gravel basin of the stream, including a regularly shaped flat-bottomed cut into natural (Figure 2B- Trough), and an irregularly shaped feature only partly seen in the area (?Hearth). Both contained burnt stones set in a charcoal-stained soil. A shallow pit (Figure 2B- Pit) also contained the same deposit, and was sealed by a fine dark grey silt which also sealed the other negative features, suggesting a period of abandonment before the next exploitation of the site. Investigation of the lowest deposits on the site was hampered by the high water-table and by pollutants in the water.

Above the horizon of disuse, a hearth area may be defined by a spread of burnt stone in a fire-reddened soil (Figure 2B). Over the hearth, a spread of burnt, angular quartzite stones, upcast material from a trough, formed the upper horizon of the site, up to 5cm in depth, and was truncated by several field drains.

The drains, which are characterised by a content of 18th and 19th Century pottery and are aligned at 45 degrees to the stream, represent the next phase of activity. Some of these drains contained burnt stones re-used as a soakaway material. Sealing the drains and the burnt mounds, was a layer of topsoil and vegetation mixed during recent machining.

3.2: Sondage F.

In Sondage F (Figure 1C), ca. 15m south of Area I, a deposit of heat-cracked stone was exposed at a depth of 0.5m below the modern ground surface, sealed beneath a protective deposit of clean buff-brown silt. The area surrounding the sondage was examined by resistivity survey, but results were inconclusive, because of high levels of background noise and the depth of stone deposits. However the survey has pinpointed one high resistivity anomaly which may be interpreted as a stone filled pit.

3.3: Sondage H.

A steep-sided, sub-rectangular cut ca. 1.5m by 0.6m into the stream gravel was located in Sondage H (Figure 1C), containing a quantity of burnt stone. This is provisionally interpreted as a trough, but fuller investigation was hampered by the level of the water-table. A scatter of heat-cracked stones at the west end of Area II may derive from a burnt mound here of which only the negative features survive, the mound having been washed through by the stream.

3.4: Area II.

Two discontinuous 1m- wide evaluation trenches were hand excavated for a total length of ca. 39m, at a right angle to the valley floor, (Figure 1C). Natural alluvial deposits were exposed along the full length of the trenches, comprising orange sands and silts containing pockets of gravel, manganese and green clay mixed by cryoturbation processes during Pleistocene glaciation.

The earliest manmade feature here, located 0.35m below the surface of the modern topsoil, was the western part of a gravelled road of irregular surface ca. 3cm in depth, extending for a width of 2.5m in the trench (Figure 2B). A patchy fine deposit of orange sand accumulated on its surface, possibly during a period of abandonment, sealed beneath a second gravel surface of similar character to the first, but extending 2m beyond to the west. This irregular surface demonstrated much use, and featured a pair of parallel cart ruts, aligned approximately north-south (Figure 2B), caused by compression of the gravel into the soft alluvium below, along the line of maximum wear. Sometime after the construction of the road a v-

section ditch was inserted into the silt to a depth of 0.7m below the contemporary road surface, possibly marking the centre of the road, and a further ditch containing buff-grey silt was cut along the Western edge. Abandonment and disuse of the road was marked by the cutting of a series of postholes (10-20 cm diameter) into the second gravel surface (Figure 2B). No pattern was visible, but they may indicate encroachment on the line of the road by boundaries or timber-framed buildings. Two further ditches of u-shaped section and a pit seen in the western arm of Area II (Figure 2C) may be contemporary with these features. Sealing these manmade features was a deep layer of sand and gravel, the product of downslope erosion over a considerable period, and was succeeded by a buildup of mixed soil and silt in formation during the 19th and 20th Centuries, which contained Post-Medieval and Modern artefacts.

4.0: DISCUSSION.

The archaeological return from this evaluation has been high relative to the limited resources available and the statistically small area investigated. Evidence from the excavated burnt mound (Area I) indicates two phases of use, separated by a silting of the site. Despite extensive, and mostly very recent disturbance to the site it has been possible to identify various component features associated with burnt mounds. The stratigraphic succession of manmade deposits suggests a shifting focus of activity within the burnt mound, in particular exemplified by the succession of the stone pits by a hearth, covered in turn by stone upcast. The location of parts of two further sites suggests a dense local distribution and complements the existing fieldwork in the South Birmingham area. The shallow depth of the cut features may suggest that the sites were utilised on a more temporary basis than was the case at other excavated examples, such as Cob Lane, Bournville (Barfield and Hodder, 1980). Further valuable information will derive from the processing of environmental samples, Carbon-14 dating and more detailed analysis of the results. It is possible that the evaluation has uncovered, for the first time in the Birmingham area, a distinct class of 'temporary' burnt mound.

The evidence from Area II is more enigmatic, despite the features being readily identifiable by form to a specific function. The inability to date the significant discoveries made, in particular the roads, is a major disappointment. The similarity of matrix between the surfaces seen during the evaluation, and the road entering the fort excavated in the 1930s should be noted: although that similarity may be conditioned by the local availability of materials. The perceived orientation of the road, leading towards the fort may hint at its purpose. The documentary history of the area suggests its only intensive use to have been in the Roman period, which complements the evidence of extensive use by wheeled carts indicated by the heavily rutted road surface. Despite the lack of artifacts to date the features, two distinct phases of activity may be discerned, the first relating to the intensive use of the roads, the second representing construction on the line of the roads; evidence not inconsistent with the possibility of a civil Vicus settlement outside the forts.

5.0: PROPOSALS AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

It is a matter for concern that successive opportunities for archaeological excavation at Metchley in the past have been largely missed. The present site must now be almost the only area of substantial size capable of answering vital questions about the dynamics of the military occupation and the possible Vicus. Given the demonstrable potential of the site and the threat posed by an extensive development, what further archaeological response might be appropriate ?

5.1: Preservation.

Total preservation of the site on archaeological grounds alone is probably not justifiable despite the demonstrable potential of this area.

5.2: Development Implications.

Given that the development of the site will begin in April 1989 a research design for the threat posed to the deposits is urgently required. The evaluation has highlighted the whole of the area to east of the valley bottom as having considerable archaeological importance. The principal threat to the deposits lies in the foundations, services and associated landscaping works which may penetrate the archaeologically important layers located just 0.3m below the modern surface. Because of the size, timetable and nature of the development it is now impractical to amend foundation design to minimise damage to the archaeological deposits.

5.3: Archaeological Response.

It is proposed that a large area (Figure 1C) ca. 15m by 40m be opened by machine, and hand excavated to investigate the alignment of the roads, establish the structural arrangements of the ?Vicus settlement indicated by the evaluation, and define its character and date. Machine excavation of a long transect at 90 degrees to Area II (Figure 1C) will enhance our understanding of the sedimentary history of the area and facilitate the recognition of any major linear features. Hand excavation of the area surrounding Sondage F will facilitate a full definition of the burnt mound structure here and enable the recovery of environmental and Carbon-14 samples.

A watching brief during the construction works will be required to record disturbance of deposits by foundation trenches or services in areas not otherwise examined in evaluation or by excavation.

Given that opportunities for excavation on this scale in the City are of necessity limited, every opportunity should be taken to publicise the project, which has already attracted a gratifyingly high level of media interest, with the aim of raising public awareness of the role and need for professional archaeology in Birmingham, and highlighting the value of the

City's archaeological inheritance. Publication of the results of the excavation in a local academic journal will also ensure the local availability of the conclusions. Ultimately erection of a vandal proof information and display board in the area of the scheduled ancient monument will serve to highlight the importance of this site and of the Metchley forts in general.

6.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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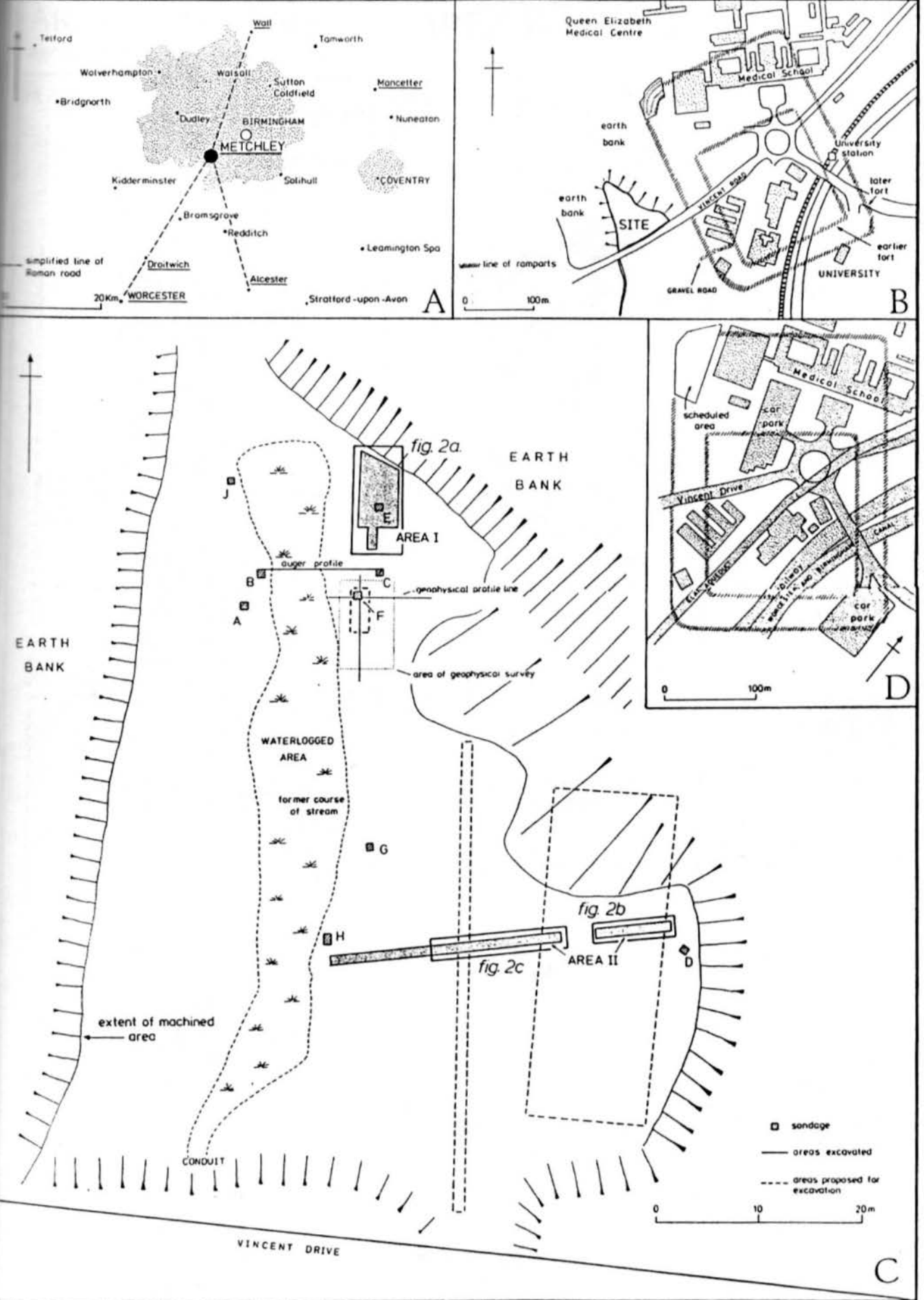


Figure 1

