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BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT

BRIDGNORTH
FRIARY

B.U.F.A.U.



Introduction

An archaeological excavation of the site of the Bridgnorth Friary in Shropshire was carried out by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in the summer of 1981. The work was carried out as part of the Bridgnorth Friary Archaeological Excavations, which are being carried out by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit.

An Archaeological Evaluation at Bridgnorth Friary, Shropshire
An Interim Account

The purpose of this report is to provide an interim account of the archaeological evaluation carried out at the site of the Bridgnorth Friary in Shropshire. The work was carried out by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit in the summer of 1981. The work was carried out as part of the Bridgnorth Friary Archaeological Excavations, which are being carried out by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. A map drawn in 1981 has attempted to show the position of the Friary structure. The site of the Friary is situated on the east bank of the River Sever. The site is bounded to the north by the River Sever, to the south by the River Sever, to the east by the River Sever, and to the west by the River Sever. A map drawn in 1981 has attempted to show the position of the Friary structure. The site of the Friary is situated on the east bank of the River Sever. The site is bounded to the north by the River Sever, to the south by the River Sever, to the east by the River Sever, and to the west by the River Sever.

The Excavation

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 (E. Newton)

An Archaeological Assessment at Bridgnorth Friary, Shropshire

Introduction

An archaeological assessment on the site of the former Southwell's Carpet Works, off Friars' Street, Bridgnorth, was undertaken over a ten day period in April/May 1989. The work was carried out by the Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit and commissioned by the developer, Bovis Homes Limited.

In the light of important discoveries in one of the areas examined during the assessment this brief summary of the results has been prepared as an interim statement, in advance of a more detailed account, to accompany an on-site inspection of the most substantial uncovered remains.

The piecemeal development of the Carpet Works eventually took in most, if not all, of the Precinct of the medieval Franciscan Friary; founded like so many of its urban counterparts, on the fringes of the town, though little is known about the layout of the Friary buildings. A map drawn in 1860 has attempted to relate the position of the Friary structures to the buildings of the Carpet Works but this is too schematic to be of more than passing value; documentary accounts and nineteenth century illustrations do however testify to two Friary buildings surviving the Dissolution and enjoying new functions, one as a dwelling house and the other, probably the monastic refectory, as a Malt House, before their demolition with the extension of the works. No controlled excavation has taken place on the site prior to the present brief campaign.

The Evaluation Trenches

Nine trenches were excavated by machine and then cleaned by hand. A detailed photographic, drawn, and written record was made of features and deposits in each trench. A brief description of the sequence in each trench will now be given (see Figure 1), along with a summary of further observations made during the monitoring of ground stripping and demolition elsewhere on the site.

Trench 1 Immediately under a horizon of post-medieval demolition deposits was encountered, in plan, the brick lining of a cellar. Excavation was then restricted to the interior of the cellar itself and infill removed down to the floor, formed of natural sandstone, at a depth of c.1.75 metres below the cellar cut.

Trench 2 The removal of the factory floor surface revealed a thin levelling deposit of mortar, sand, and broken brick, c.0.5 - 0.15 metres thick, directly over the gently sloping red sandstone bedrock. A north-south aligned pipe-trench cut across the eastern end of the trench.

Trench 3 The concrete floor of the factory here either directly overlay sandstone bedrock or was separated from that surface by a thin spread of sand, c.0.02 - 0.05 metres thick. Cut into the bedrock was a north-south pipe-trench, itself cut by a rectangular hole, c.0.50 metres deep, in which was set a stone stanchion block packed around with mortar and sandy soil. Redeposited in this packing soil were fragments of a human skull, including much of the lower jaw, doubtless disturbed from a burial in the nearby monastic cemetery.

Trenches 4 and 5 These two interconnected trenches were dug to the east of the upstanding stretch of listed sandstone terrace retaining wall that is to be preserved by the development as an historic feature. With the removal of the brick and concrete factory floor surfaces, the upper courses of a number of sandstone walls were immediately exposed (see Figure 2) and left in situ. Hand excavation was then undertaken to reveal in plan the layout of this building and deeper test-trenches dug to ascertain the surviving height of walling and the depth and date of associated deposits. It was immediately apparent that at least two phases of construction were represented here. The earliest features would appear to be the walls F3, running east-west almost down the centre of Trench 4, and F32, running north-south along the eastern edge of Trench 5. A third wall

(F33) whose upper surface only was exposed, running east-west across the northern end of Trench 5 may be contemporary with F3 and F32, and indeed may be the northern outer wall of the building to which they all belong. All three walls are constructed of well-cut and faced sandstone blocks, F32 being shown to stand to a height of 1.80 metres over seven courses, and F3 to c.1.40 metres and seven courses, though it was not bottomed for safety reasons. The test-trench dug alongside F3 suggested that this was also an external wall with mixed soil deposits simply butted up against the wall face; some sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from these deposits but these need not necessarily date the construction of the wall. The test-trench dug to the west of F32 revealed that the wall was set on top of a deposit of stone rubble and mixed sand, perhaps the fill of a foundation cut, the western edge of this massive cut being a sloping red sandstone bedrock cliff face. The fill of this cut produced, at its lowest levels, medieval pottery; while the upper fill of the cut had been heavily disturbed by the digging of post-medieval pipe-trenches the lowest fills were untouched and thus the pottery may, in fact, be contemporary with the construction of the building.

A fourth wall (F4) running north-south is in all probability contemporary with F3 though this could not be proven. It had been partially demolished and its upper surface, exhibiting signs of wear, walked upon, perhaps providing a threshold which is flush with a worn, laid sandstone surface to the north of, and partially obscuring, F3. This attested demolition and relaying of surfaces forms the second phase of use of the building, probably contemporary with the setting of a rough line of steps (F36) to the south-west of wall F32, and the creation of a walled-off well-house to the north-west. The brick lining of the well was partially exposed along with a shallow-footed sandstone wall (F37) delimiting the area and a gently sloping rubble and sandstone ramp (F22) leading up to the well itself.

The area to the west of wall F3 was crossed by pipe-trenches, subsequently levelled up and the building demolished, possibly as a prelude to the encroachment of the Carpet Works into this zone. In the demolition deposit were found not only a number of glazed medieval floor tiles but also a number of malting bricks of the post-medieval period. Unfortunately, an opportunity to test the survival of any floor levels inside the sandstone building could not be taken as the interior lies to the north of Trench 4 and to the east of Trench 5. However, the substantial surviving walls and the evidence of levelling up here prior to the laying of the brick and concrete factory floors suggests that floor levels may well survive intact.

Trench 6 The natural sandstone bedrock was exposed immediately beneath the thin sand and mortar levelling deposit below the factory floor. A brick-wall ran north-south across the western end of the trench while pre-factory pipe trenches were cut into the bedrock to the east and north-west of this wall.

Trench 7 There was a considerable depth of post-medieval demolition rubble - that is mortar, brick and tile, up to c.1.15 metres thick, over the bedrock at the western end of the trench. A north-south running brick wall is either the wall of a cellar or a terrace retaining wall, as the level of the natural drops to the east of this wall at least a further 1.40 metres; no definite depth was ascertained as the feature was not bottomed.

Trench 8 Although heavily disturbed by the insertion of a number of enormous stone stanchion blocks belonging to the Carpet Factory and by pre-factory pipe laying, much useful information came from this trench, which lies c.20 metres to the north of the sandstone wall (F33) in Trench 5.

A well-constructed stone-lined and flagged drain (F20), though disturbed and partially truncated by the later intrusions, was traced for the whole length of the trench, running in an east-west direction. No associated floor surfaces or walls were

encountered and it seems likely that this is an external feature, outside the building recorded in Trenches 4 and 5, and dating to the post-medieval period as seventeenth or eighteenth century pottery was recovered from its backfill.

A deeper sondage dug alongside the south section of the trench revealed an interesting sequence of deposits earlier than the surfaces cut through by the drain, including an area of sandstone rubble, perhaps a yard surface, and a depth of c.0.90 metres of spread make-up above a greenish perhaps riverine, clay. Medieval pottery was recovered from the layers in this sequence and while no tip lines were visible within the deposits when seen in section, it is likely that they represent incidents of spreading and levelling.

Trench 9

This long trench, outside the boundaries of the Carpet Factory was machined on three levels, stepping down southwards towards the River Severn, to reveal the sequence of deposits here. Under a thick loamy garden soil (between 0.25 - 0.30 metres thick) was a mixed sandy deposit whose upper surface was cut by a number of circular or more irregular holes, all of which, upon excavation, proved to be shallow post-medieval intrusions. This sandy deposit was in one section removed, being c.0.40 metres thick, and overlay a dirty gravel of similar thickness which in turn overlay a green silty clay. The clay was not removed though probing suggested that it was over 0.50 metres in thickness. Medieval pottery only was recovered from the sand and gravel deposits, perhaps suggesting that they represent the same incident of ground make-up as recorded in Trench 8.

Trench 10

Immediately under the factory floor level was encountered the natural bedrock at the west end of the trench, sloping down sharply towards the east where a wedge of post-medieval demolition rubble had been used to level the ground for the laying of the floor. The stripping of some of this rubble revealed a deep cut into the bedrock, rectangular in shape and

backfilled with pitched roofing tile and brick, doubtless a cellar infilled with demolition rubble from a nearby building.

Trench 11 A hand-dug sondage dug up against a sandstone wall revealed during ground clearance revealed that at least 1.20 metres, or five courses, of this wall were below present day ground level. Portions of this wall, and associated buttresses were recorded for a length of 25 metres along the southern riverside road frontage, the stone wall having been incorporated into a later brick structure that projects out to the south of the area under development. Sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the lower levels of spoil up against the wall face.

Summary and Conclusions

The albeit limited archaeological interventions on the Friary site, and observations made during ground stripping elsewhere within the development area, have revealed much about the topography of the site prior to the utilisation of the whole area by Southwell's Carpet Factory. Trenches 1 and 10 indicated that the row of houses formerly on the north side of the stepped passageway called Friars Load had been deeply cellared and that any earlier structures or deposits here will have been dug away. All the trenches on the upper terrace of the Factory site (that is Trenches 3, 6, 7, and 10) suggested, by the fact that the factory floor level either directly overlay natural bedrock or a levelling spread of post-medieval mortar and demolition rubble, that any archaeological deposits that may have once been present here have been removed; disturbance of deposits is indeed hinted at by the presence of the skull in Trench 3. Observation of the concrete stripping over a wider area between Trenches 6 and 7 revealed a similar thin sequence above bedrock, while to the north of Trench 7 further rectangular areas of brickwork were exposed, to suggest further cellaring as seen in Trench 7 itself.

A similar sequence, by its shallowness again suggesting stripping of deposits, was also recorded on the lower terrace in Trench 2.

The levelled make-up deposits recorded in Trenches 8 and 9 are probably of medieval origin, perhaps contemporary episodes of land reclamation, although apparently outside the main area of Friary buildings. Remarkably well preserved evidence of large sandstone buildings was revealed in Trenches 4 and 5 and hinted at in Trench 11, though the walling in the latter trench was of a different structure to that in the former. It seems likely that the building in Trenches 4 and 5 is the one known as the Malt House on early maps - indeed malting tiles were found in its demolition deposits - being originally the two storey monks' Refectory and Dormitory building left standing after the Dissolution of the Friary in 1538 and subsequently reused for grain storage. The main part of this building evidently lies in the area to the north of Trench 4 and to the east of Trench 5. The remarkable height of surviving walling suggests that at the time of the demolition of this structure a conscious attempt was made to raise the ground level in this area, as also seen in Trench 11, and this may well have unconsciously helped to preserve the interior of the building from damage. The building with buttresses quite possibly the Friary Church, whose east wall was revealed reused in a nineteenth century brick structure, is less easy to understand at present since the rest of the building is still encased within a standing brick shell. The interior of this brick-bounded projection has been filled with loose soil up to a level of c.3.5 metres, the concrete factory floor being laid directly over the infill, and this may mean that this building has been preserved in a similar manner to the structure further to the north.

Excavation has shown that only one area of the development site has archaeological potential, that being centred on the remains of a sandstone building in Trenches 4 and 5, and a building further to the south. The state of survival of walling, the recovery of medieval floor tiles and pottery, suggests that these buildings are of great importance not only for the archaeology of medieval Bridgnorth but also for the wider study of monastic architecture and life in Shropshire and the Midlands.

Report by Iain Ferris 5 May, 1989

Based on notes by Hugh Hannaford and Jon Sterenberg

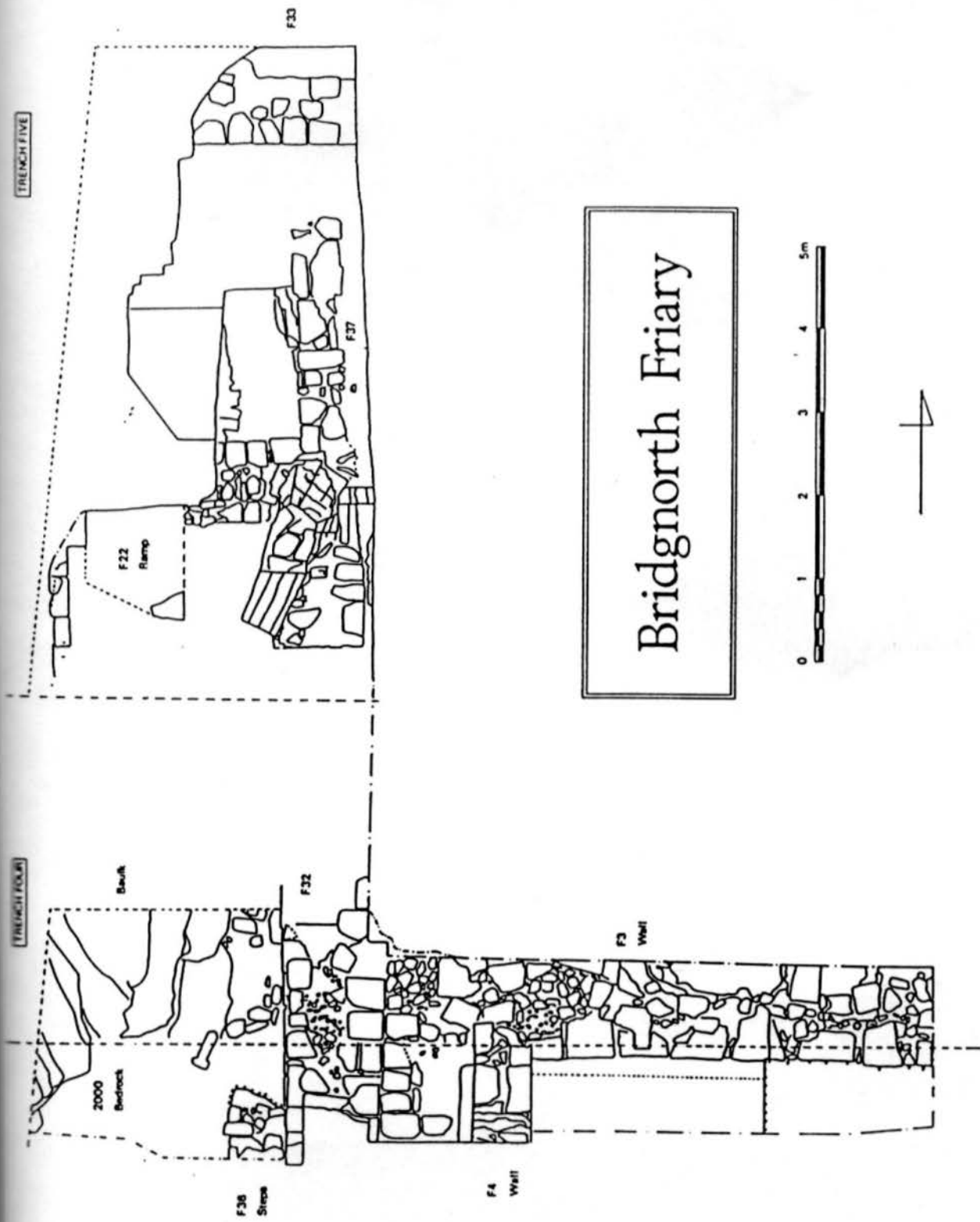


Figure 2