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METCHLEY, BIRMINGHAM

An Archaeological Evaluation

1989

Report

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1.0: SUMMARY

This report describes the results of an archaeological evaluation of land off Vincent Drive, Metchley, Birmingham (Figure 1A: Figure 1B). Excavation concentrated on the investigation of an area threatened by development on the northern valley slope, and revealed information concerning the build-up of sediments during the Pleistocene period. Several widely-dispersed archaeological features were also discovered, tentatively dated to the Post-Medieval period.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

In February 1989 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (B.U.F.A.U.) was commissioned by the Development Department of Birmingham City Council to undertake a further archaeological evaluation of land off Vincent Drive, Metchley, centred on NGR. SP 041836 (Figure 1B), in advance of a major hospital development. This evaluation followed an earlier archaeological evaluation effected by the author on behalf of B.U.F.A.U. which located and selectively sampled a group of prehistoric 'burnt mounds' in the valley bottom (Jones 1989).

Seven trenches were excavated, providing an extensive evaluation in the area of the proposed psychiatric hostel on the northern valley slope. An earlier trench (II) dug in this area in 1988/89 uncovered a gravelled track and associated features. The purpose of the 1989 evaluation was to establish the survival and character of the manmade deposits here, and provide information about the sequence of water-lain deposits. Five trenches were dug in the hostel area (Trenches IV-VIII) (Figure 1C). A further trench was machined along the valley floor (Trench III) to a depth of 1m. A mechanical excavator was employed under archaeological control to excavate Trench III, and to remove the modern overburden from Trenches IV-VIII. From then on excavation proceeded systematically by hand, to natural base where possible. A detailed written and photographic record was made of the deposits thus encountered.

This report presents a summary of the information obtained by excavation, supplemented by observations made during the subsequent machining of the site, and background documentary research.

3.0: THE SITE AND ITS SETTING

The site is located 5km south-west of Birmingham City centre, adjacent to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital complex. A naturally formed, shallow valley, cuts into the geological solid, a sandstone, deposited during the Mesozoic period. Within the Keuper Marl (Midland Mudstone) above are bands of sands capped by a gravel bed which outcrops widely around Metchley and the University (Eastwood et al., 1925).

Evidence for the earliest human exploitation of the site comprises a group of 'burnt mounds,' discovered in the valley bottom during the earlier evaluation (Jones 1989). By analogy with similar washing or cooking sites found in the Birmingham area, they may be dated to the Later Bronze Age (ca. 1400-600 BC.).

In the Mid 1st century AD a Roman auxiliary fort was established at Metchley (Figure 1B) in a location of strategic importance, at the junction of roads from Alcester and Worcester to the south, and Wall to the north. Limited excavation of the defended area and the defences indicates two main phases of occupation. The larger fort belongs to the first period, succeeded, after perhaps a period of abandonment, by a smaller fort (Figure 1B).

There is as yet no archaeological evidence for the exploitation of this area in the Medieval period. In the 17th century a hunting lodge was constructed within the Roman fort, and the site and surrounding area was used for hunting. Later the area was exploited for arable farming, which only ceased relatively recently.

4.0: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESULTS

4.1: Trenches III and IV

Trench III (Figure 1C) set perpendicular to Trench II (Jones 1989), was machined for a length of 30m parallel to the valley floor to investigate the sequence of water-lain deposits in the valley. The lowest level encountered comprised a naturally formed orange silt containing pockets of gravel, and leached a buff-white colour to the north. At the southern end, two steep-sided shallow scoops of rectangular shape were noted, possibly root-holes containing brown silt, but no artifacts were recovered and they could not be related to any manmade feature.

In Trench IV (Figure 1C), measuring 2m x 4m, natural clay silt was contacted 0.8m below the modern surface. Above, was a former stream-bed ca. 1.5m wide, aligned approximately west-east and formed of closely-bedded rounded quartzite pebbles. Above, was a mixed horizon of brown silt-soil containing fragments of tarmac and concrete, possibly dumped during the construction of Vincent Drive (Figure 1B). No archaeological features or deposits were contacted.

4.2: Trench V

In Trench V (Figure 1C), natural orange silt was contacted 0.8m below the modern surface, overlain by a pebble stream-bed aligned approximately west-east, similar in form to that encountered in Trench IV to the south. The earliest manmade feature contacted was a laid gravel trackway ca. 80 mm deep, aligned north-west south-east. The upper surface was uneven and patched, suggesting wear and possible cart-ruts.

A fine layer of disturbed buff-brown silt containing pockets of gravel sealed the trackway, and was cut by a ?pit of sub-rectangular shape, 1m across, 0.5m deep in the south-east corner of the trench (Figure 1C). The steep-sided pit contained a compact, coarse, leached, light grey sand

intermingled with lenses of soft charcoal. Irregularly-shaped dumps of a similar compact, coarse sand were contacted sealing the track surface, but they could not be related to any archaeological feature, nor were any artifacts found within either deposit. Beneath the modern topsoil was a dark brown silt which contained a ?Roman whetstone, ex-situ, and 18th-century pottery. Ploughmarks were visible in its upper horizon and may have truncated any late archaeological deposits here.

4.3: Trenches VI-VIII

Trench VI (Figure 1C), 7m in length, was aligned perpendicular to the other evaluation trenches and parallel to the valley bottom. Natural orange silt was contacted ca. 0.5m below the modern surface. Above this at the west of the trench, an orange-brown disturbed silt up to 0.2m in depth, merged imperceptably with a leached buff-white silt to the north. The dark brown topsoil above contained 19th and 20th-century artifacts. A similar sequence of deposits was located in Trench VII. No archaeological features or deposits were noted in Trenches VI and VII.

Trench VIII (Figure 1C) extended for a length of 20m, aligned south-west north-east. Natural orange silt containing gravel pockets was contacted ca. 0.8m below the modern surface. A steeply-sided pit, up to 2m in diameter, cut into disturbed natural and contained a series of tipped layers of dark humic, charcoal-rich soil, and 18th-century artifacts. A dark humic, buried soil ca. 0.1m in depth sealed the pit, and was recorded over the entire length of the trench, immediately beneath the modern topsoil.

4.4: The Watching brief

Intermittent observations were made during major groundworks in May 1989, which involved the lowering of the ground surface in the waterlogged area Figure 1C) by up to 2m.

A burnt mound, ca. 15m across, was recorded in a machined north-facing section (Figure 1C). This comprised an exposure of heat cracked pebbles, set in a charcoal-stained soil overlying natural orange silt, 8cm in depth. Two metres north from this exposure, a pit ca. 1.5m in diameter was cut into natural and contained heat-cracked pebbles set in a dark grey silt, flecked with charcoal. A series of negative linear features were observed cut into the natural silt in the vicinity of the section exposure, and contained a matrix of charcoal-stained silt-soil. No formal archaeological monitoring of the groundworks was possible, nor were any of the features so revealed, excavated.

5.0: DISCUSSION

Despite a relatively limited archaeological return from this small-scale evaluation, new information has been gained relating both to the post-glacial valley form and its later human exploitation.

The location of leached silts in Trenches III and VI, and pebble-beds in Trenches IV and V, provides new information on the form of the Holocene environment in this valley. In addition to the central water-source in the

valley floor, other streams, possibly fed by springs, crossed the area. The proximity of such sources of slow-running water may have provided a favourable environment for the location of a group of Bronze Age 'burnt mounds,' numbering at least five in total. This new information could ideally be complemented by further study of the sedimentary deposits, and environmental samples of burnt mound material from Metchley would enable a useful cross-comparison to be made with similar data from other such sites in the region.

The evidence of the manmade features in Trench V is more enigmatic. Examination of a larger area of the gravelled track has confirmed its interpretation as a manmade roadway, subjected to considerable wear and repair. The dumping of hard sand on its surface and infilling the pit cannot be fully explained. This compact deposit, which probably does not derive from the immediate locality, may have been an ingredient in an industrial process which involved heating, as witnessed by the substantial quantity of charcoal mixed in the pit fill.

The other recognisable features, such as the pit in Trench VIII may be placed firmly in the Post-Medieval period. Because of the lack of datable artifacts (especially from the Roman period) it is tempting to ascribe the features in Trench V to the Post-Medieval period. However, despite the lack of artifactual evidence it may be possible to date the pit by Carbon-14.

6.0: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Both small-scale evaluations of this large area were commissioned as an urgent response after the grant of the Notice of Permitted Development for this major hospital development; consequently there was no opportunity to undertake an extensive evaluation of the site and formulate proposals to minimise the effect of the development upon the archaeological deposits. Despite the limited survival of the archaeological features at Metchley, this evaluation has highlighted the need for an informed archaeological input at an early stage in the planning process.

The availability of a predictive study of this area, based on survey and research and supplemented by small-scale problem-orientated evaluation could assist in the targetting of threatened areas of archaeological interest. Such a survey, in conjunction with the Sites and Monuments record, would provide a vital planning tool that would help safeguard important archaeological evidence and enable forward planning for the recording of such evidence as an integral part of the planning process.

7.0: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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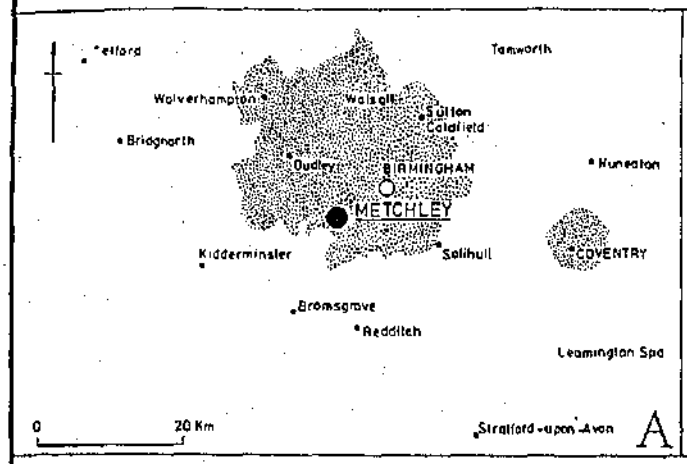

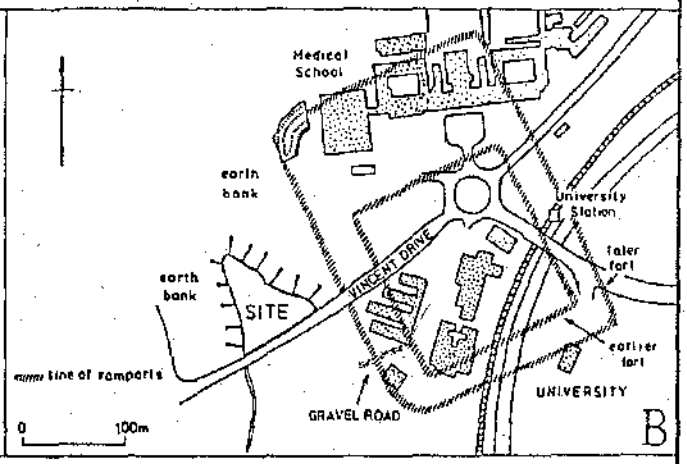

Areas of archaeological investigation