Craven Arms, Shropshire:

An

Archaeological Watching Brief

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit 1992

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Introduction

In March 1992 **Severn Trent Water Limited** commissioned **Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit** to monitor the cutting of a stretch of water-main trench next to the B4368, approximately 1 kilometre west of Craven Arms, Shropshire (fig.1, N.G.R:SO 423 827). Recognition of an archaeological dimension to the development was implied by the presence of an important Roman road (SA108), identified by Margary as Watling Street (west), which ran through this area (Margary 1973,320). In addition, an evaluation carried out by **B.U.F.A.U.** in 1991 had identified a single-ditched, square enclosure of Romano-British date, with internal features associated with metalworking 100m north of the cross-roads, indicating contemporary settlement in the vicinity (Ferris 1991).

Watling Street (west) was an important military routeway built in the late-1st century A.D. to connect the two legionary fortresses of Caerleon in South Wales to Chester in the north, powerbases from which the conquest and control of Wales were organised. Thirty kilometres north of Craven Arms the road ties Wroxeter (Viroconium) into this strategic matrix. Viroconium grew to be the fourth largest town in Roman Britain.

The road turns northeast towards Viroconium near Craven Arms. This line is rigidly followed, and is still marked by existing roads for several miles till the line approaches Clungunford. This line was probably necessitated by the need to steer a course through the watershed in the hills to the south. It appears that the exact course of the Watling Street (west) south of the junction with the B4368 may have veered slightly to the west in recent years, because the two stretches of road are not exactly aligned either side of the junction.

Method

The water-main was cut using a narrow-bucketed JCB which produced a trench 1m deep and about 0.40m wide. A 40m section was monitored through the lane and its adjacent verges, on the south side of the junction with the B4368 (fig.1c). Recording was in the form of notes on the stratigraphy encountered, drawn sections of features, and a photographic record of sample sections. In addition, an inspection was made of the surrounding landscape to place the road in context.

Report

A section through the present line of the lane to Clungunford and about 5m into the western verge was monitored on Day 1. No evidence for the foundations of the Roman road was found, and because the stratigraphy encountered was of recent date, associated with the construction of the present road, no context numbers were ascribed to the different layers visible. The present road surface is built on a layer of mixed aggregate and clay about 0.5m deep, with a dump of large granitic stones on its eastern side. The footing for the road overlay a mixed layer of dirty grey clay about 0.3m thick, on top of the clean natural yellow/grey clay. The stratigraphy to the west of the road, under the topsoil, consisted of a band of red/brown loamy clay about 0.6m thick directly overlying the natural clay.

On Day 2, observation continued to the east of the crossroads for a distance of c.25m (the context numbers ascribed to the different layers may be compared to those in fig.2). Underneath the topsoil a band of orange clay/loam (1001), about 0.5m deep and similar in appearance to that on the west verge of the road overlaid a thin spread of dark brown aggregate material (1003). In the centre of the aggregate a pit, 1.5m wide, was cut into the underlying layers, and backfilled with the aggregate. Approximately 10m from the road side the aggregate spread finished as it butted against the natural clay (1002) which rose 0.3m from the centre of the trench to a level of 0.5m below the ground surface at the east of the

trench. This clay (1002) was different in character to the natural clay noted further to the west, being stickier and orange in colour.

Underneath the aggregate layer (1003) lay the possible remains of a different, more easterly, road alignment. However, dating of this feature was not possible. The feature consisted of a layer of extremely compact clay/stone (1004) about 0.3m thick. The compaction may be the result of its acting as a foundation for an earlier roadsurface, or it may simply be a geological feature. The eastern edge of the compacted clay/stone (1004) was cut by the aggregate backfilled pit whose east edge cut into a different layer of dumped humic material with quantities of demolition material in its matrix (1005). A small quantity of 19th/20th century pottery was recovered from this context, indicating that it was the product of recent activity. The dump (1005) overlay the sticky orange clay (1002) visible in the eastern corner of the trench.

Conclusions

Unless the compacted clay/stone layer (1004) represents the last vestiges of a road foundation, it must be presumed that later disturbance down to the natural clay has destroyed any evidence for the exact line or construction of the Roman road. There is a great deal of circumstantial evidence in the landscape to support this conclusion, rather than the possibility that the road alignment has changed dramatically since the Roman period. Firstly, the equation of the line of the Roman road with the present lane skirting Craven Arms to the north of the junction is convincing, reflecting a parish boundary for part of its course, and being indicative of considerable antiquity.

Secondly, there does not appear to be any reason for the road to dramatically change its course in the valley bottom; the Roman engineers were clearly sighting for the watershed in the hills to the south.

Thirdly, a brief inspection of the meadows south of the junction with the B4368 did not find any evidence of road foundations in the steeply cut sections of the stream meandering along the valley bottom, and in the field

to the south east of the junction there appeared to be earthwork remains suggestive of redundant medieval arable farming close to the line of the road. Given the preservation of the line of the Roman road to the north it is unlikely that medieval agriculture would have intruded over the line of a road which was clearly not redundant.

Acknowledgements

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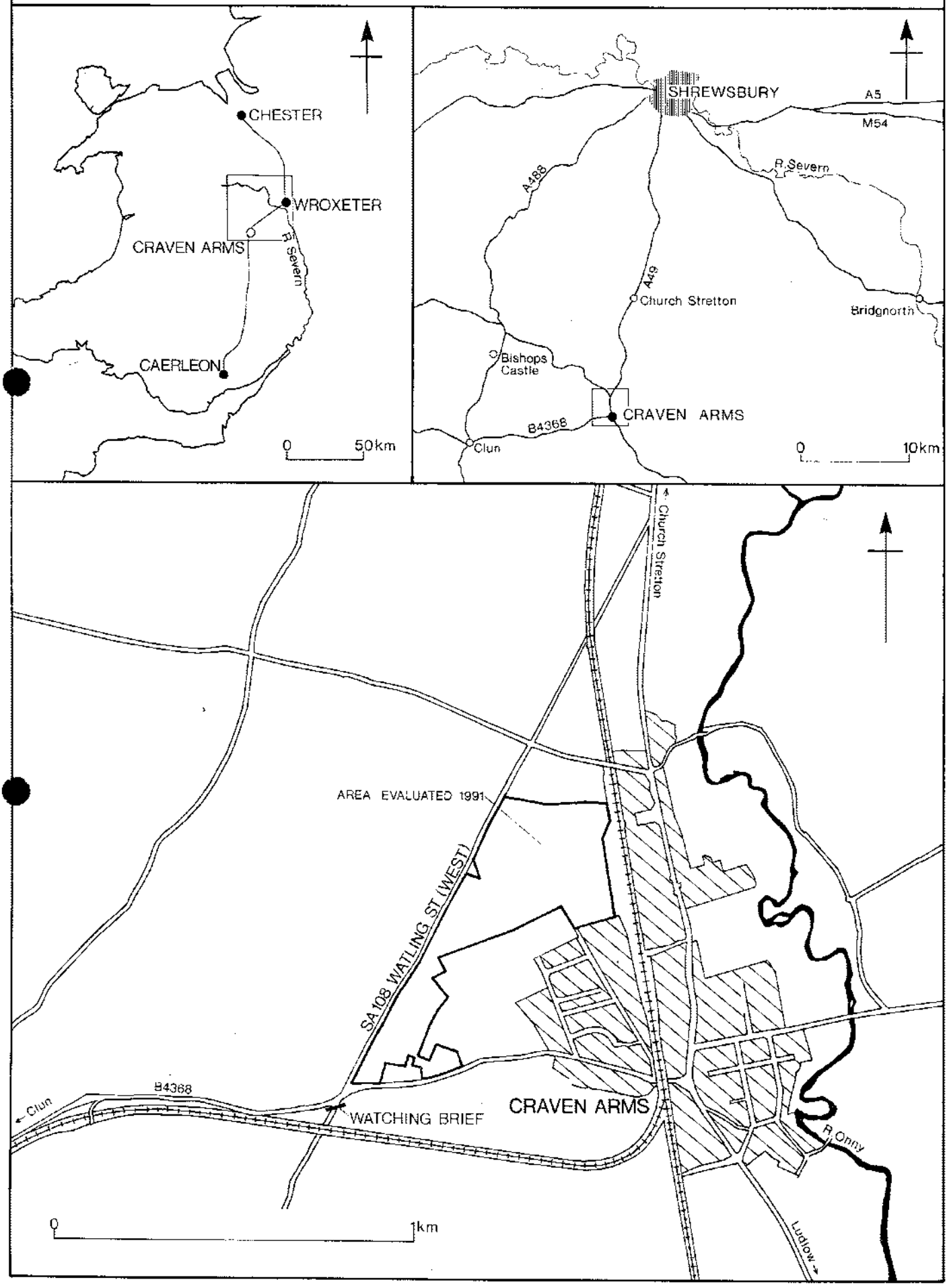
References

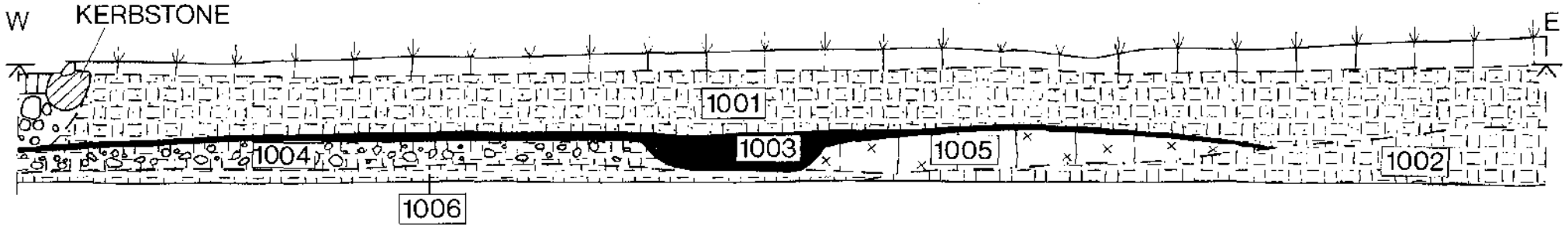
Ferris, I. 1991 **An Archaeological Evaluation at Craven Arms, Shropshire.** B.U.F.A.U. Report 157.

Margary, I.D. 1973 **Roman Roads in Britian.** Third edition

CRAVEN ARMS : WATLING ST. (WEST)



CRAVEN ARMS : WATLING ST (WEST)
Schematic Section (Part) West/East



Topsoil

Clay

Sand

Aggregate

Mortar

0 5m