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An Archaeological Evaluation at
Oldbury Camp, Near Nuneaton,
Warwickshire

by
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Introduction

In March 1992 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (B.U.F.A.U.) was commissioned by Severn Trent Water Ltd. to carry out an archaeological evaluation at Oldbury Camp, near Nuneaton, Warwickshire (NGR SJ 314947; Figure 1), in order to assess the archaeological implications of the proposed laying of a new overflow pipeline to the reservoir now largely occupying the central part of the site, and of the planned erection of a security fence around the reservoir itself. The camp is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM 037; Warwickshire SMR No 255).

The site of the camp or hillfort, on a ridge, overlooks the Vale of Leicester to the east. To the north a large diorite quarry is in operation, to the west lie farms and arable land, and to the south stands a collection of buildings, originally outhouses of a Georgian brick house, Oldbury Hall, which occupied the site until its partial destruction during an air-raid in 1941 and its levelling in 1948. The reservoir construction followed, with the site coming into full operation in 1954. Further groundworks associated with the reservoir were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s.

Previous Archaeological Work

The rectangular camp or hillfort of c2.8ha, is of Iron Age date though finds of Neolithic material do not rule out the possibility of an earlier camp here. The ramparts are still distinguishable as upstanding earthworks on the southwest, northwest and northeast sides, while that to the southeast has been largely destroyed. A deep diorite quarry has been dug to the north and northwest of the monument, and the northwest bank and ditch have been badly damaged. There are now three entrances, though the original entrance was probably to the southeast.

Dugdale, in his "Antiquities of Warwickshire" (1730), described the site as having "rampires whose height and largenesse do still shew the strength", and reported the discovery during ploughing in the north part of the fort of "diverse stone flints", presumably Neolithic axes. He also noted that part of a chapel still stood on the south side of the fort, this probably being the last remaining vestige of the presence of a cell of Benedictine Nuns, recorded by documentary evidence as being at Oldbury, and probably contained within the earthworks.

In 1949 trenching was conducted by K.D.M. Dauncey, of the Department of Archaeology at Birmingham University, in advance of the construction of the reservoir. Trenching to the northwest of Oldbury Hall produced no archaeological evidence. To the northeast a trench was cut through the rampart and revealed its construction to be of diorite rubble backed by heavy stone packing; also recorded were possible internal quarry hollows and a small ditch. Trenches cut across the ditch indicated it to be steep-sided and flat-bottomed, 10 feet wide and 30 feet deep close to the northwest causeway. The only find from the excavations was a single flint chip.

In 1973 trial holes in advance of further reservoir construction produced no features or finds.

The Evaluation (Figure 2)

The evaluation was to consist of the digging of six trial trenches, 15m long and 1.2m wide, with the option of further trenching at right angles to two of the trial trenches, should it be required, and the monitoring of four boreholes being drilled as part of a geotechnical survey. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the depth, character, significance and state of preservation of any archaeological deposits present, and to determine the probable effects on any such deposits of the proposed works, with a view to recommending an appropriate archaeological response. Excavation of archaeological features and deposits was to be limited to that consonant with the achievement of the evaluation aims, with the intention of minimising disturbance to the monument. Elucidation of the nature of the ground, once excavation had commenced, meant that certain

alterations to the scale of the evaluation could be made, though within the broad condition of the Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) and having gained sufficient information to achieve the stated aims. The trenches were laid out as close to the lines of the pipe-trench and fence as trees and vegetation would allow.

The six trenches, three to the north of the reservoir, one to the west, and two to the east, were opened by hand. The turf and topsoil were removed down to a depth of, on average, 0.30m. Further hand excavation was undertaken to define any archaeological features or deposits. All features and deposits were recorded by means of photography, measured drawings and pro-forma written sheets. Finds recovered during this process were collected by context. The results from each trench are summarised below, followed by an interpretation and discussion of their significance.

Trench A

This 15m long trench, aligned approximately north-south, was positioned towards the base of the reservoir slope, along the proposed line of the security fence, and parallel to the western rampart bank. The sequence of deposits from the top was as follows.

A 0.25m thick layer of topsoil (1000) overlay a 0.30m thick deposit of brown shale silt (1001) containing a high percentage of fragments of natural rock. This overlay a thin, 0.01m, deposit of wash which, in turn, was seen to be covering the make-up of the tail end of the bank. No features were visible in the cleaned upper surface of the bank. The make-up of the bank consisted of a 0.15-0.30m thick dump of yellow-grey clay shale (1002), revealed in a 1.50m long sondage in the centre of the trench to be uniform in section, overlying a 0.40m thick layer of clean, sterile silt clay (1003) which may be redeposited natural subsoil, in turn overlying the unequivocally natural clay silt subsoil (1004) at a depth of 1.40m below the present ground surface here. No features cut into 1003 or 1004 were visible either in plan or in section in the sondage where the layers were exposed. Root action had penetrated down through the surface of the natural. There was no sign of a buried old ground surface.

No finds were recovered from the trench. A sample for possible pollen analysis was taken at the interface of 1003 and the natural.

Trench B

This trench, 15m long and aligned approximately east-west was excavated towards the northeast corner of the reservoir earthwork bank. The 0.20m topsoil (2000) was removed along the whole length of the trench down to the top of a deposit of compacted stone and brick rubble. Excavation then continued at either end of the trench, leaving the central part unexcavated; sufficient information was retrieved from the excavated stretches of trench to allow the central baulk to remain undisturbed and in situ.

The rubble deposit exposed beneath the topsoil was seen to be the top of a dump of mixed material (variously called 2001-2005), that is rock, brick and diorite, overlying the natural subsoil (2010) at the west end of the trench at a depth of 1.40m below the present ground surface. No features cutting natural were apparent. At the east end of the trench the natural profile of the ground had been destroyed by pipe-laying, with the pipe itself, packed around with rubble (2007), being exposed at a depth of 1.70m below present ground surface.

Evidence suggests that the natural had been graded here as part of the landscaping associated with the reservoir construction.

No finds were recovered.

Trench C (Figure 3)

Originally laid out as 15m long, this trench, aligned east-west, was only excavated down to natural at its east end due to the presence of a live electric cable running across the centre of the trench and the proximity of Borehole No. 4, data from which made the excavation of the west end of the trench unnecessary.

Under the heavily-rooted, 0.20m deep topsoil (3000) was a 0.20m thick layer of clean, black charcoally loam (3001) overlying a 0.05m thick layer of dirty buff clay (3005), in places overlain by a deposit of red clay (3004). There was also exposed under the loam 3001 the upper coursing of a brick wall (F1) running north-south across the trench. A 0.30m thick deposit of clinker (3006) abutted the wall to both the east and the west, this perhaps

being a yard surfacing of some kind. No foundation cut for the brick wall was found; rather, it sat on top of a 0.40m thick spread of loose rubble (3007) which was partially sealed by the clinker 3006. The rubble was removed only to the west of the wall, in a 1.50m long sondage and was seen to overlie a 0.05m thick spread of clean, buff mortary sandy silt (3008) containing a sherd of 17th century pottery and a small river pebble. This overlay, in turn, a 0.35m thick deposit of clean brown clay silt (3009) again containing post-medieval pottery and two river pebbles. Layer 3009 directly overlay the natural subsoil (3010), suggesting that deturfing had taken place here before the construction of the brick structure, at a depth of 1.50m below present ground surface.

Post-medieval pottery was recovered from all contexts excavated. The river pebbles may be of interest; such non-indigenous pebbles are often found on Iron Age sites.

Borehole 4, nearby, confirmed the depth of natural here as c.1.50m.

Trench D

Positioned in the northeast corner of the reservoir earthwork, and aligned roughly north-south, this 15m long trench had its 0.20m topsoil (4000) removed along its whole length to expose a surface of compacted rubble (4001) containing a high percentage of stone and brick. Excavation through this rubble was undertaken in two 2m long sondages, one at the north and one at the south end of the trench. The rubble, 0.50m thick, overlay a 0.40m thick layer of clean brown silt clay (4002) which was cleaned carefully though no features were revealed cut into this deposit either in plan or in section. Layer 4002 overlay the natural subsoil (4003) at a depth of 1.10m below ground surface. No features could be seen cut into the natural. No finds were recovered.

Borehole 3, nearby, confirmed the depth of the natural here as c.1.0m.

Trench E

This trench, 15m long and positioned on the eastern side of the reservoir, was stripped of the 0.20m deep and heavily rooted topsoil (5000) down to the top of a spread of compacted brick and stone rubble (5001). Boreholes

Nos. 1 and 2, to the south and north of the trench respectively, indicated that this deposit must be between 1.50m (in the north) to 3.0m (in the south) in depth; therefore further excavation, taking into account that the line of the pipe must in any case pass through this area, was not undertaken.

Trench F/G/H

This trench, positioned in a copse of trees near the southeastern corner of the fort, was positioned on a roughly north-south alignment, to take in the line of the feeder pipe as it enters the SAM. Three sections only of the originally 15m long trench were excavated down to natural shale. Results from these sections did not suggest that the opening of the rest of the trench would be of any value. The area, sloping from south to north, was sealed by a 0.20m-0.30m thick layer of rooty loam and pine needles (6000), over a 0.60m thick loamy silt (6001). The natural ground surface also was seen to be on a south-north slope. No features are encountered cut into the natural shale.

Post-medieval pottery was recovered from 6001.

Discussion and Implications

Results from the evaluation are, from an archaeological point of view, disappointing. No archaeology was contacted in Trenches B, D, E and F/G/H. A wall and associated deposits of a post-medieval date, probably part of the Georgian house or one of its outbuildings, were encountered in Trench C; it is a remote possibility that three small river pebbles found in deposits 3008 and 3009 could be redeposited Iron Age sling-shots or unused pot-boilers. In Trench A the inner tail, or wash from the inner tail, of the western rampart bank was exposed and a section dug through the bank make-up; no relict old ground surface was encountered under the bank.

Inspection of the site shows that a considerable amount of landscaping occurred during the construction of the reservoir, with dug-out spoil being built up as an earthwork around the reservoir platform. This material was compacted and consequently proved difficult to excavate where encountered

during the evaluation. Trenches B, D and E all had to be cut through this material, as did the boreholes. The thickness of this material varied; from 1m in the north (in Trench D), to 3m in the south (in Borehole No. 1); from 1m in the east (in Trench D), to 1.20-1.50m in the west (in Trench B). Evidence from Trench C suggested that the remains of the former Georgian building had also been levelled as part of this operation.

The depth of modern overburden suggests that the security fence, with foundations 0.80m deep, will not cause any disturbance on the north, south, and east sides of the reservoir; however, on the west side Trench A clipped the inner tail, or wash from the inner tail, of the rampart, and should the line of the fence pass through this point it will pose a potential threat. Moving the line of the fence c.1m eastwards, towards the reservoir earthwork bank, would negate this threat.

As to the line of the pipe trench, no archaeological constraints to the proposed route were identified in the evaluation, assuming that the remains of the brick house are not prioritised, though the logistical problems associated with cutting through the reservoir construction rubble meant that not as great an area of natural subsoil could be examined in plan as originally was envisaged.

Recommendations

Despite the largely negative results of the evaluation and the negative results of previous work in the camp interior, it is nevertheless recommended that an archaeological watching brief be maintained on the line of the pipetrench as it approaches the monument and as it passes through the Scheduled Area. The depth of modern overburden may well present logistical problems to the contractor cutting the pipe trench, and this may dictate the form of watching brief employed; either this will involve the inspection of each length of trench machined down to the top of natural, to allow for identification in the surface of the natural of any cut-features, or the inspection of the sections only along each length of trench if they have to be machined through natural. Data about depths and location of

modern overburden will, in any case, be useful for future management decisions about further construction work at the site.

No watching brief is recommended for the fence foundation pits, assuming that the western line of the fence will be moved eastwards, to cut the modern reservoir bank rather than the tail of the fort rampart.

Acknowledgements

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Scheduled Monument Consent was arranged through Andrew Brown of English Heritage who visited the site to discuss the results of the evaluation. John Bridgeman of Severn Trent Water Ltd. made all the necessary arrangements for work to proceed.

John Hodgson of Warwickshire County Council Sites and Monuments Record provided print-outs of the SMR data on the site and acknowledgement is given for using the data to compile the background summary of previous discoveries and work at the site contained in this report.

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OLDBURY CAMP NUNEATON, WARWICKSHIRE Site Location

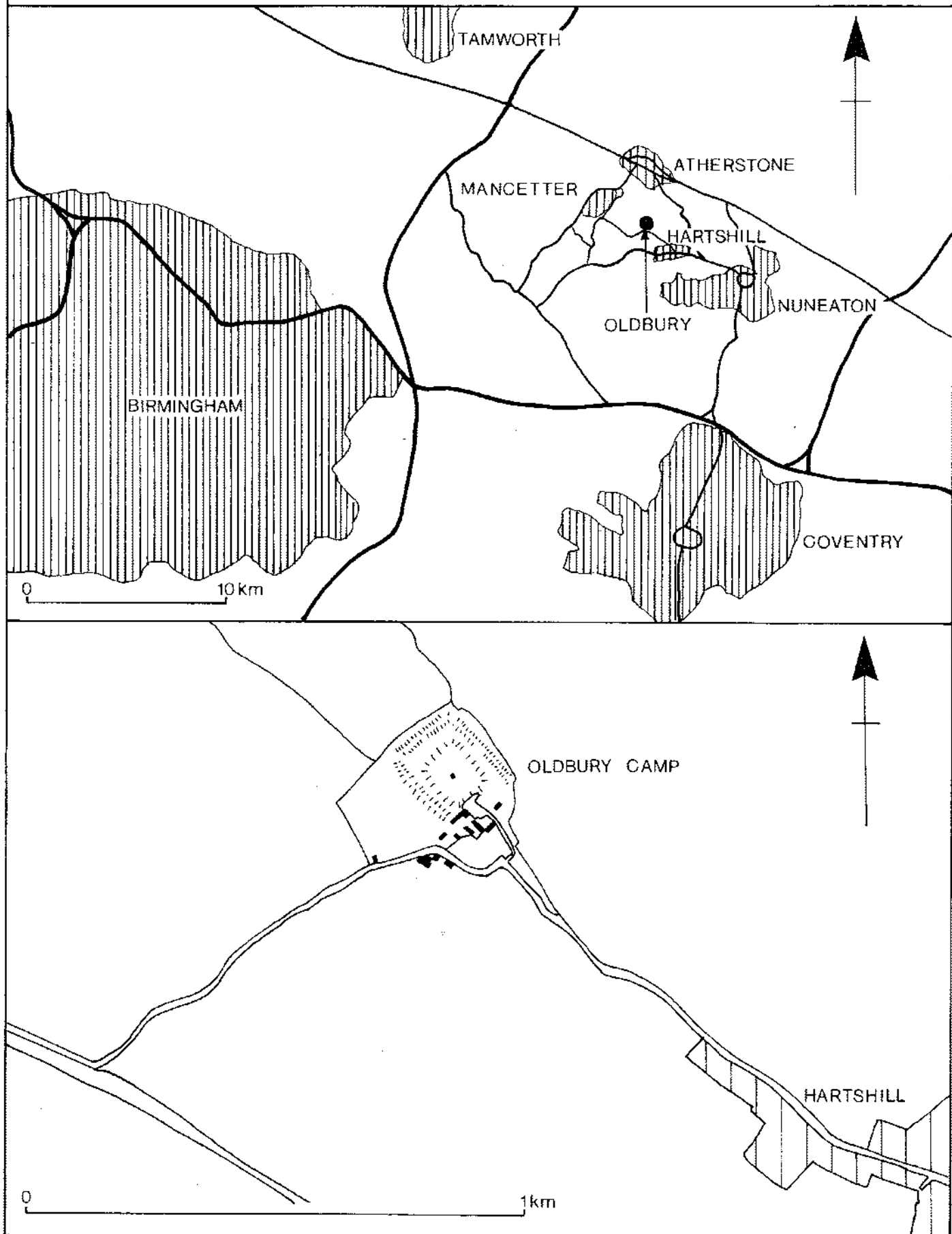
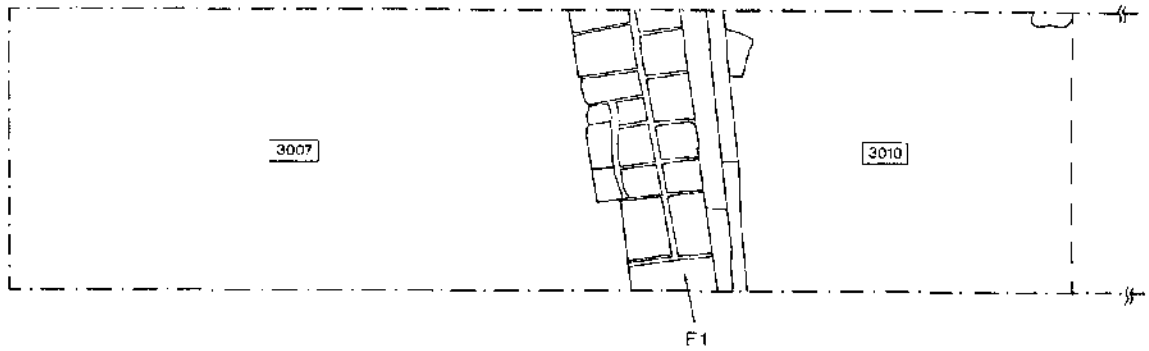


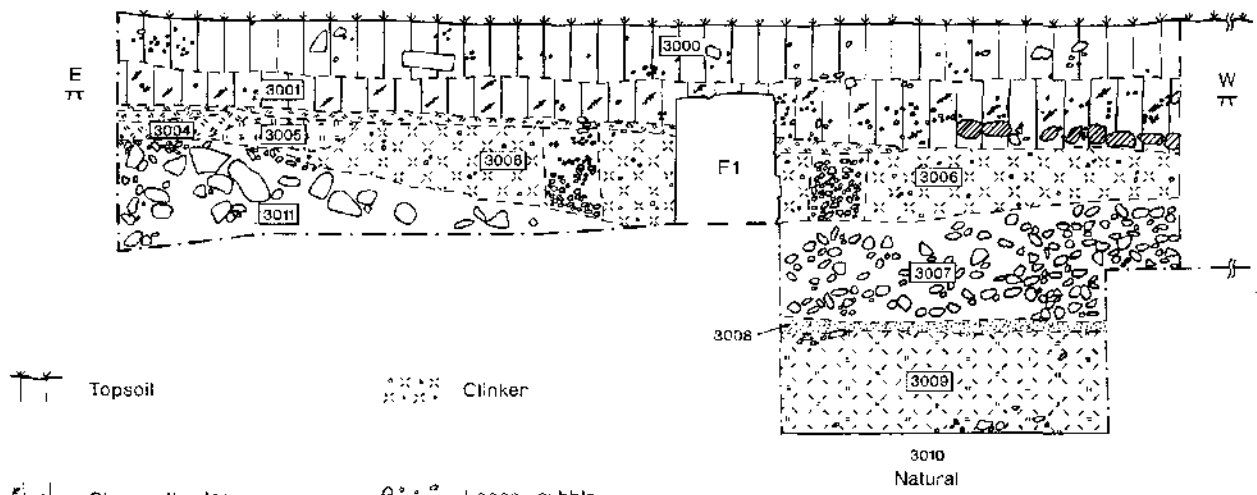
Figure 1

OLDBURY CAMP, NUNEATON, WARWICKSHIRE

TRENCH C PLAN



TRENCH C NORTH-FACING SECTION












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|---|-----------------|---|--------------|
|  | Topsoil |  | Clinker |
|  | Charcoally loam |  | Loose rubble |
|  | Red clay |  | Sandy silt |
|  | Buff clay |  | Clay silt |
|  | Diorite | | |

Figure 3