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MENDIP BUSINESS PARK, SHEPTON MALLET
An Archaeological Watching Brief for a Warehouse Development (Framptons)
1999

by
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Introduction

In February 1999 the author was commissioned by Wayopen Estates Ltd. to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the preliminary stages of development on a site within the Mendip Business Park, Shepton Mallet, Somerset. The area was previously the subject of an archaeological evaluation in 1992 (Leach 1992), at which time it was designated as 'Area C', following an earlier series of evaluations elsewhere on the Business Park site (Geophysical Surveys, 1990; Leach, Mould & Richardson, 1990). Archaeological monitoring of the current development was a condition of the planning consent, and in accordance with recommendations from the Environment Department, Somerset County Council.

The Site

The Mendip Business Park (NGR ST 632247) occupies part of a former greenfield site within an area which has been identified as the location of a small Romano-British town lying astride the Fosse Way (Leach 1991). The identity and character of this settlement were first recognised in 1990 in the course of large scale excavations immediately to the south of the MBP, and subsequently through a series of further site evaluations and excavations along both sides of Fosse Lane, formerly the Fosse Way (Fig 1). The most recent involved further extensive excavations on the site for a Tesco supermarket and petrol station in 1996-7, which lies adjacent and to the south west of this latest development (Leach 1992, 'Area B', Fig.3).

All of these investigations have contributed to an understanding of what is now a relatively well explored site, some of whose remains are now protected as a scheduled Ancient Monument. Information from the site evaluation of 1992 (*ibid*) can now be interpreted with greater confidence in the light of information retrieved during the excavations for Tesco, in particular.

A series of five machine-excavated linear trenches were cut across the current development site in 1992 (Fig. 2). These revealed a relatively sparse distribution of remains attributable to the Romano-British settlement, comprising several boundary or drainage ditches, some pits, a number of hearths or ovens, and at least one cobbled street or yard surface. These were almost certainly set within a group of small compounds or enclosures defined by ditches or drystone walls and laid out to the rear of buildings and more intensively developed parts of the settlement further west towards the original Fosse Way road frontage. It was not possible from the information retrieved in 1992 to attempt a more detailed reconstruction of the arrangements here, although apparently similar areas have been more extensively explored in excavations elsewhere across the Fosse Lane site. Although relatively

well preserved, the archaeological evidence did not suggest the presence of very extensive or complex remains, in an area which seems to have been located close to the periphery of settlement.

At the time of the evaluation this site had already been buried beneath (in places) up to 1m of dumped overburden, much of it originating from the initial layout of the Business Park in 1990. This process had inevitably resulted in some damage to underlying archaeological remains, most of which lay originally beneath a thin turf and topsoil cover and above or cut into limestone bedrock. At the northern and southern extremities of the site areas of almost total disturbance down to bedrock levels were identified, resulting in virtual obliteration of any archaeological remains there.

The Watching Brief

Plans for the development involved the erection of a large steel-framed warehouse building on an approximately east-west axis. Prior to this the whole site had been sealed by up to 0.5m of stone rubble forming a platform for the structure and service areas around it. This formed part of a protective capping over the original made-up ground level and surviving archaeological remains beneath, which was never less than 0.5m thick and in most places exceeded 1m. The new building was supported on a series of pad foundations for columns set around its perimeter and set to levels which in all instances reached or penetrated the natural bedrock. Service trenches and wall foundations were all contained within the levels of modern overburden, and no reduced level excavation was required for floors within the building or surfaces around it.

A total of 42 pits for pad foundations penetrated to levels where archaeological features or deposits might have survived, and their excavation was monitored. Three sets of pits were dug, varying between 3.2 x 2.0m (14), 2.0 x 1.6m (14) and 1.2 x 1.2m (14) in area. Ground conditions and their depth prevented any access for recording purposes to the great majority and no new or previously recorded archaeological remains were observed. The only directly accessible pits were those at the south end of the building, 12 in total. Here bedrock levels were encountered less than 1m below the built-up level for the new building, and in some instances part of the original subsoil horizon had survived beneath the modern stone rubble makeup. No features or artefacts of archaeological significance were encountered. To the north the bedrock and subsoil horizon, where surviving, declined steadily to depths which are now in places over 2m beneath the modern surface of the development site. As stated, none of the pits in this area could be entered and in addition, many were partly flooded soon after excavation. Some survival of original subsoil levels above natural clay or bedrock horizons was noted in exposed sections, but no archaeological remains were seen.

Conclusions

No further significant archaeological evidence was recovered from this area of the Fosse Lane Roman settlement as a result of this watching brief, despite observation of those excavations for the development which reached levels at which such remains might have survived. It is possible that a limited destruction may have occurred at certain points within some of the base plate pits, however, the earlier evaluation of 1992 had demonstrated a relative sparsity of remains in this zone and the raising of levels for the current development has almost certainly contributed to the preservation of the majority which should still remain.

References

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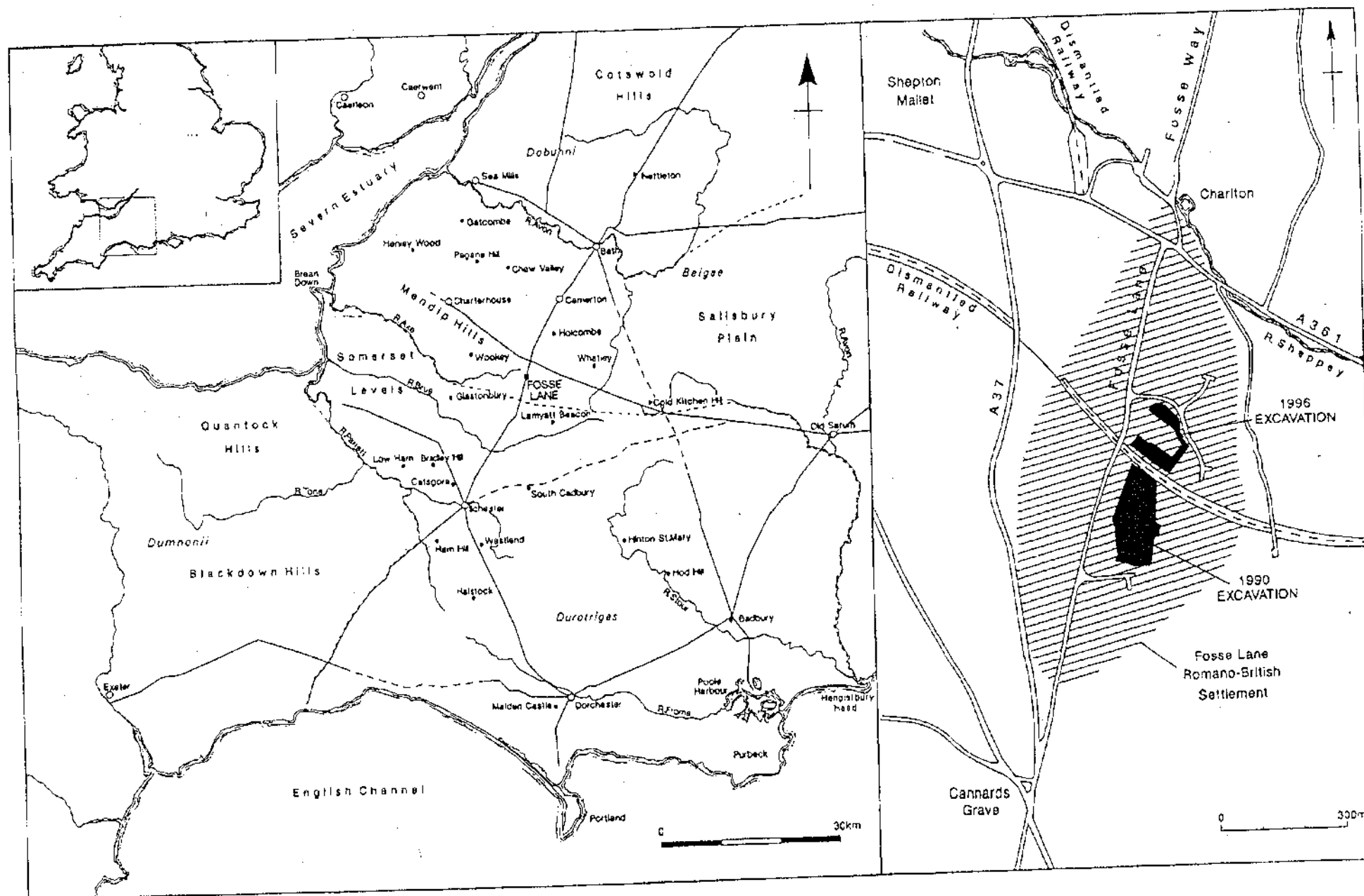


Fig.1

MENDIP BUSINESS PARK Archaeological Evaluations 1990-99

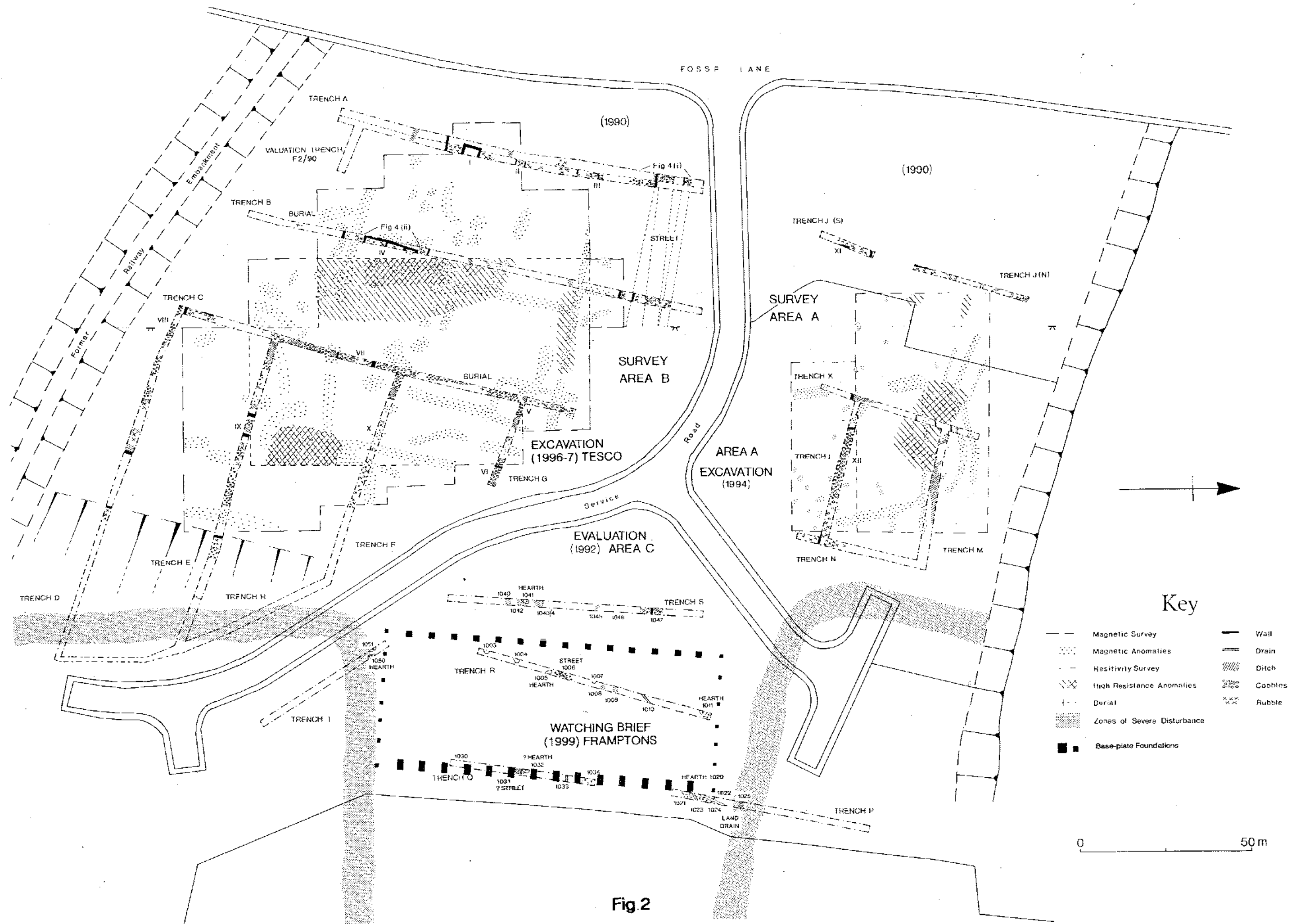


Fig 2