Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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Bent Farm Quarry, Congleton
An Archaeological Watching Brief 1993

by
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1.0 Introduction

This report documents the monitoring of topsoil stripping undertaken at Bent Farm Silica Sand Quarry, Wallhill Lane, Congleton for Hepworth Minerals and Chemicals Ltd, by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) during June/July 1993 (Fig. 1a).

Archaeological monitoring was required by Cheshire County Council as a condition of the proposed extension of quarrying. The aim was to ascertain whether any sub-surface features were evident following topsoil removal, and if such remains were apparent, to attempt to record and identify them. The following report briefly summarises the methodology and findings of the work carried out.

2.0 Background

A watching brief was considered necessary on this site due to its close proximity to a Scheduled Ancient Monument (County Monument no.106) located at NGR SJ 8370 6195. This is believed to be the remains of a Roman temporary marching camp, although at the time of trial archaeological excavations, both in 1967 and 1970 by G.D.B. Jones , no dating evidence was recovered and thus the exact period of its occupation is uncertain.

The area subjected to topsoil stripping comprised one field of approximately 4 hectares. The field had been devoted to pasture for many years, grazed by cattle and sheep, before being given over to arable crops during the last two decades. It was left fallow for the last few years up until the present time (Fig. 1b).

A total of 13 man days were spent monitoring the stripping work with a further one day to prepare this report.

3.0 Methodology

With the principal objective of the watching brief being to identify any sub-surface features, the topsoil stripping was monitored continuously as it was removed mechanically. Subsequent to the identification of possible features, some areas were then cleared of loose spoil by hand, either wholly or in part. In conjunction with this, any artifacts discovered during the stripping were also recovered. Although the use of a toothed bucket was necessary for the removal of the topsoil, the nature of the subsoil - predominantly a yellow sandy clay - allowed for reasonable discrimination of any features that became apparent. Where features were encountered they were cleaned, recorded by photography and scale drawing and either partly or wholly excavated, depending upon their apparent nature and significance.

Over the whole of the area the depth of topsoil stripping was fairly consistent, to a depth of approximately 200 - 400mm. This is with the exception of the southern boundary and the southeast corner, where the depth was greater (approximately 600 - 1000 mm).

4.0 Results

Those features that were observed during monitoring and subsequently investigated revealed nothing to suggest the survival of any significant archaeology. An outline of the remains identified is as follows;

A linear feature running east-west across the area was partially excavated by hand. It was revealed to be some 2 metres in width, cutting the subsoil to a depth of approximately 200mm and filled with topsoil and concentrations of root. Three tree stumps were also removed during stripping along the line of this feature. No artifacts were recovered from the fill. Local information and the above observations suggest that this was a field boundary, probably a hedge, removed some twenty years ago.

Three large, irregular, sub-circular features were also identified. Two of these, towards the

north end of the area, covered an area of approximately 10 square metres each and cut the subsoil to a depth of 500mm at the deepest point. The third, towards the south eastern corner of the area, covered an area of approximately 20 square metres, cutting the subsoil to a depth of 1000mm. All three were filled with topsoil and partial excavation revealed nothing of archaeological significance. The recovered artifacts consisted of one sherd of modern china, one nail and a piece of butchered animal bone. These features appeared to be filled-in ponds.

Three small features were investigated, two of which were of similar appearance, being oval in plan with dimensions of approximately 1.5 x 0.6 metres. Both cut the subsoil to a depth of 200mm and were filled with topsoil. These were fully excavated and revealed nothing of significance. It is suspected that they were both of natural origin. The third feature, also fully excavated, was oval in plan, with dimensions of approximately 1.0 x 0.6 metres. It cut into the subsoil to a depth of 250mm and was filled with topsoil containing a large amount of charcoal, a sample of which was recovered. No other datable material was recovered from the feature, which appeared to be a hearth.

5.0 Conclusions

It seems that in the light of the investigation of the identified features in association with local information, the transition from pastoral to arable land use can account for infill of the linear and large sub-circular features. The hearth feature, containing no artifactual evidence and being an isolated example, does not allow for any conclusive comments concerning its context within the area or its archaeological significance. On balance, an association with relatively recent agricultural land use is the most likely explanation for the hearth.

A handful of artifacts from the overlying topsoil removed from the field as a whole are once again indicative of no more than agricultural exploitation over the past two centuries or so, although medieval and perhaps earlier land use could be inferred. There is no archaeological evidence from this watching brief therefore, for any former activity within this field relating to anything other than previous and relatively recent agricultural regimes.

6.0 Acknowledgements

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