Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit

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Shelton-Uckington Pipe Line
Shropshire
Archaeological Evaluation

by

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Introduction

In October 1993 Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned by Severn Trent Water to carry out an evaluation of two potential archaeological sites on the proposed line of the Shelton to Uckington link main, Shropshire. The evaluation was carried out in accordance with a brief prepared by Mr M.D. Watson, Senior Archaeologist, Leisure Services Department, Shropshire County Council, who also monitored the work.

The two sites were identified as cropmarks through oblique aerial photography (Figure). At SJ5190 1017 is a cropmark ring-ditch (SA4483), first recorded in 1990. It is well-defined, with a single ditch and an internal central feature, and is likely to be a ploughed-out prehistoric round barrow, the central feature representing the location of the primary grave. Surface inspection reveals a distinct 'swelling' in the ground at the location of the ring-ditch, which is probably the much eroded and spread remains of the mound. The line of the new mains runs within 30 metres of the ring ditch, and the possibility existed that any 'satellite' burials and other features frequently associated with such sites would be affected.

The second cropmark site, centred on SJ5315 0990, is much more poorly defined. The Sites and Monuments Record describes the principal feature (SA474) as the "SW and SE sides of probable rectangular ditched enclosure; inner ditch slight with surrounding larger ditch". On analogy with excavated examples, such an enclosure would be expected to date to the Iron Age or Romano-British periods. Extending southwards from the enclosure are a series of linear cropmark features (SA2011), interpreted as a possible associated field system. The SMR plot of these features is shown on the figure. However, inspection of the photographs themselves emphasises the poor definition of the cropmarks, and an alternative plot by RCHME shows a much less coherent arrangement of linear features of which the enclosure is not a clearly-defined element. The line of the water main was however to pass through the complex of features and archaeological evaluation was therefore necessary.

The sites are located near to Emstrey, which lies some 4km southeast of Shrewsbury. The ring ditch (SA4483) is situated in a pasture field on glacial sands and gravels 0.75km west of Emstrey. The putative enclosure and field system (SA474 and SA2011) are situated on alluvial soils immediately west of the River Severn. The field in which the cropmarks appear is currently arable, while the field to the north, into which the features may be projected to continue, is currently pasture.

Method

The work was carried out in two stages, an initial geophysical survey followed by trial excavations. The results of the geophysical survey in part determined the positions of the excavated trenches.

There were three areas of geophysical survey (Figure), Areas A and B focussing on the possible enclosure and field system and their projected continuation to the north, and Area C focussing on the route of the pipeline where it passes to the south of the ring ditch.

Three trial trenches were subsequently opened, one in each of the geophysical areas, Trenches 1, 2 and 3. Topsoil was removed by JCB excavator and the exposed sub-surfaces cleaned by hand and recorded. In the case of Trench 1, where removal of topsoil revealed alluvial deposits, after cleaning the alluvium was removed in the southern half of the trench down to the underlying sands and gravels in order to test for features which may have been covered by the alluvium.

Recording was undertaken by means of measured plans, photographs and pro-forma written records. The archive will be deposited with Shropshire County Council.

Geophysical Survey

The full results of the geophysical survey are contained in Geophysical Surveys of Bradford Report number 93/117.

The following summary is provided in the report:

"The survey located potential archaeological anomalies including possible ditch and pit type responses in all three of the survey areas. Pit type responses recorded in Area A have been tentatively interpreted as archaeological, although geological/pedological variation may account for these anomalies. Ditch type anomalies detected in Area B do not appear to relate to the cropmarks identified in this area, while disturbance due to numerous ferrous responses may have masked anomalies produced by further archaeological features, if present in this area. Several possible archaeological features may have been detected in Area C including one broad ditch type anomaly, which may be a response from a former filled boundary."

There is a slight error in the plotting of geophysical Area A in Figure 1 of the geophysical report. The correct position is shown in this report.

Summary of Results

Trench 1

This trench, 75 x 1.6m, was positioned at the northern end of geophysical survey Area B, where it would both intersect the ditches and sample the interior of the putative enclosure, and where it would also intersect two possible ditches tentatively identified by the geophysical survey. 0.4m of topsoil was removed to reveal a layer of silty clay extending over the whole length of the trench, readily identified as an alluvial deposit. The presence of randomly-deposited rounded pebbles within the upper levels of this context, however, indicates disturbance of the alluvium, presumably as a consequence of agricultural activities or activities associated with buildings known to have been located towards the north end of the trench in the 19th century.

The former presence of these buildings was further indicated by a substantial quantity of demolition rubble, together with 19th-century pottery, which overlay some 9m of the silt surface at the northern end of the trench. A zone of 'ferrous disturbance' at the eastern end of geophysical survey Area B is probably also to be associated with former buildings alongside the old A5.

In the southern half of the trench, the alluvial deposits, c.0.6m thick, were removed by machine down to the natural banded sands and gravels in order to ensure that archaeological features were not buried under the alluvium. Nowhere in the trench, however, were archaeological features earlier than the 19th century encountered.

As the air photographs indicated a possible ditch cutting across the route of the pipeline to the south of the trial trench, a watching brief was carried out along this stretch during the excavation for the pipe trench (Figure). Several distinct areas of building rubble were exposed, corroborating the findings from the trench, but otherwise the results were negative.

Trench 2

Trench 2, 50 x 1.6m, was positioned at the western end of geophysical Area A, where it was designed to intercept a 'ditch-type' linear anomaly and a group of possible 'pit-type' anomalies.

A silty topsoil, varying in depth from 0.3-0.5m was removed along the length of the trench to expose the alluvial deposit identified in Trench 1. A machine-excavated sondage at the eastern end of the trench revealed natural gravels at 1.0m below ground level.

One feature, (F1) corresponding with the ditch-type anomaly identified by the geophysical survey, was excavated at the extreme western end of the trench. 1.2m wide, and filled with 0.25m of a charcoal contaminated clay-silt, this feature can be identified as the remnant of an old field boundary still visible on the ground through differential growth of the pasture (see Figure). No features corresponding to the possible 'pit-type' anomalies, or other archaeological features, were revealed.

Trench 3

The geophysical survey in Area C to the south of the ring ditch (SA4483) revealed a broad linear anomaly, interpreted as possibly a ditch or boundary, together with a cluster of possible 'pit-type' anomalies. Trench 3, 70 x 1.6m, was positioned to intersect the linear anomaly and a sample of the pit-type anomalies.

Some 0.35m of humic topsoil was removed to reveal banded sands and gravels. The broad linear response obtained by the geophysical survey corresponded with a shallow silt infill of the undulating natural materials. No features corresponding to the pit-type anomalies, or other archaeological features, were located.

Discussion

Despite some promising responses obtained during the geophysical survey, no features earlier than the 19th century were revealed by subsequent trial excavations. Geological/pedological variation must be responsible for the majority of the geophysical anomalies, as evidenced within Trench 3. Given the results of the evaluation, the status of the poorly-defined cropmarks SA474 and SA2011, interpreted as an enclosure and associated field system respectively, must be called into question. As they are aligned with the modern field boundaries it is possible that they are the product of recent agricultural activities.

Acknowledgements

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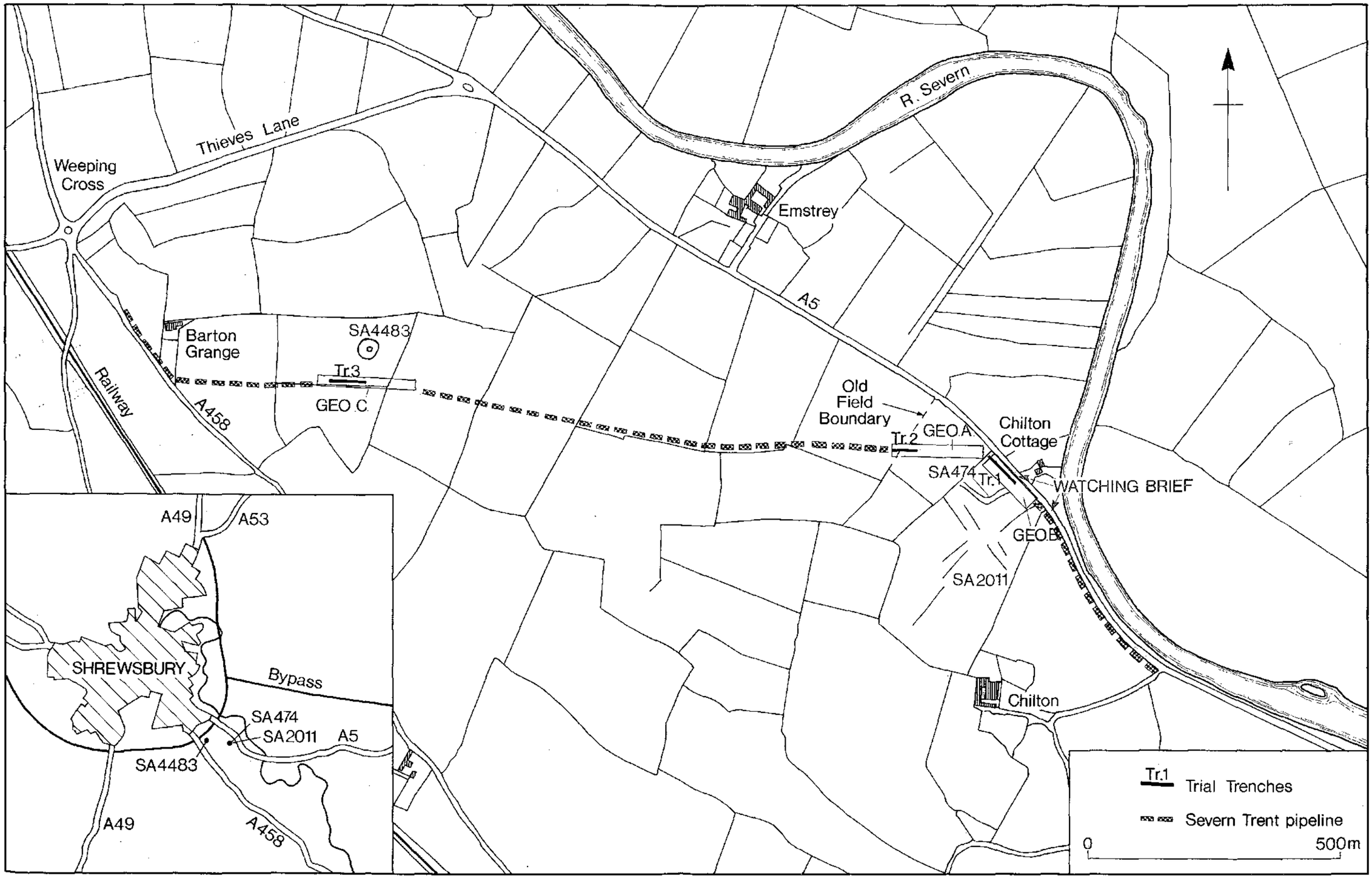
The excavation was undertaken by Marianne Ridgway, Bob Burrows and Edward Newton, and supervised by Laurence Jones.

The text was edited by Simon Buteux. Mark Breedon prepared the figure.

Reference

Geophysical Surveys of Bradford, Emstrey (Shelton-Uckington Link Main), Report no. 93/117



EMSTREY (SHELTON – UCKINGTON LINK MAIN)