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An Archaeological Evaluation off Riverside Drive, Rocester, Staffordshire

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OFF RIVERSFIELD DRIVE, ROCESTER, STAFFORDSHIRE

by
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1.0 Introduction

This report describes the results of a below ground evaluation of an area to the south of Rocester village, Staffordshire, hereinafter referred to as the site. The site (Figure 1), covers c. 1.1ha directly south of Riversfield Drive on the south-west fringe of the modern village of Rocester (centred on NGR SK1082739065).

Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) was commissioned to undertake an archaeological evaluation of the site by Staffordshire County Council. Without specific details of the proposed development having been formulated, this evaluation assessed the archaeological potential of the whole site.

2.0 The Site and its Setting

The site was located adjacent to a known Roman Fort (Staffordshire SMR 1803) for which there is evidence of extensive archaeological deposits remaining *in situ* in and around the modern layout of the village. The site was situated on the alluvial flood plain of the River Dove (for the most up to date summary of the archaeology of Rocester see Esmonde Cleary and Ferris 1996).

Geophysical survey carried out at Orton's Pasture, just to the east of the study area, produced poorer and less distinct results as the survey extended southwards onto the alluvial floodplain of the River Dove. Excavation here (1996) revealed that although the Roman settlement appeared to be concentrated on a gravel knoll to the north end of the site, there was evidence of features cutting the northern tail of the alluvium itself. It was with this in mind that an evaluation of the Riversfield Drive site was undertaken, to examine not only the alluvial deposits, but also the natural gravels below them for signs of human activity.

3.0 Aims

The primary aim of the evaluation was to establish the presence or absence of archaeological deposits above, within, and below the alluvial layer. Secondly, should archaeology exist, to determine the location, extent, date, and character of the deposits, and to assess the significance and quality of the remains. The overall aim of the project was to produce evidence which would provide the basis for possible mitigation strategies within the future development.

4.0 Methodology

Due to the results of previous geophysical surveys within the same alluvial zone at Rocester, a sequence of trial trenches only was proposed for the evaluation. The trenching pattern would allow north-south and east-west profiles of the site to be recorded. A two-stage approach was decided upon:

Stage 1 Two trenches (Tr. A, Tr. B), each measuring 70m in length, were excavated along the northern and eastern boundaries of the site (Figure 2) to facilitate the profile of the slope and underlying geology to be assessed.

Stage 2 On the basis of results from the first trenches, two further trenches (Tr. C, Tr. D Figure 2), each measuring 50m in length, were to be excavated in the centre of the study area.

Topsoil layers were removed mechanically, using a 360° Hymac excavator, under direct archaeological supervision, to expose the uppermost levels of the natural subsoil, or the alluvium. The top of the subsequent horizon, in most cases the alluvium, was cleaned by hand to define any archaeological features present. The alluvial deposits were then mechanically excavated, under archaeological supervision, down to the level of the natural gravels and the gravel was then examined for archaeological deposits.

Recording was by means of pre-printed pro-forma recording sheets for contexts and features, supplemented by scale drawings, plans, sections, and photographs, as appropriate, which are all held in the archive.

5.0 The Archaeological Results

The deficiency of archaeological deposits means that no section drawings or plans are reproduced in this report, although they are held in the archive. Instead, Figure 2 includes a series of sections through the trenches showing differences in the depth of deposits present and their heights A.O.D.

Trench A

Aligned north-south, this c.70m long and 1.60m wide trench was located along the eastern boundary of the field. The alluvial horizon (1002) was overlain by a c.0.40m thick deposit of plough-soil (1000). The red-orange alluvium (1002) was revealed in plan at the south end of the trench. No discernible features were visible cut into the alluvium but nine sherds of pottery were found in the cleaning layer (1001) directly above (see Appendix). Excavation of the topsoil in the northern part of the trench revealed the natural gravels shelving up abruptly. A second horizon of alluvium (1005), c.0.05m deep, was encountered towards the northern end of the trench, and a sub-circular feature (F1) was visible in plan south of this. Feature F1 was half-sectioned, by hand, and although it produced two sherds of grey-ware dating to the Roman period it was clearly a tree bole.

The alluvial deposits (1002 and 1005) were machine excavated to the level of the natural gravels, to reveal a profound slope southwards down onto the river flood plain with a difference in height of c.0.75m between the bottom of the slope (86.23m A.O.D.) and the top (86.97m A.O.D.).

Trench B

Aligned east-west, c.70m long and 1.60m wide, Trench B was located along the northern boundary of the field, bordering Riversfield Drive (Figure 2). Excavation of the ploughsoil (2000), c.0.30-0.40m in depth, revealed a red-orange alluvial layer (2002) over most of the trench. At the extreme east end of the trench, however, the plough-soil directly overlay the natural gravel. After the removal of the plough-soil the exposed surfaces were cleaned, and it became apparent that there were no archaeological features cut into the alluvium. The cleaning of the top of the alluvium produced eight sherds of pottery (2001, see Appendix).

The alluvium was machine excavated down onto natural, sterile deposits (2003) composed of gravel at the western end of the trench, with a broad band of mottled orange and light-brown sand and gravel in the centre of the trench, with the gravel sloping up to the east. The depth of alluvium varied between 0.05m towards the east end of the trench and c.0.60m to the west.

Trench C

Aligned east-west, c.50m long and 1.60m wide, Trench C was situated in the centre of the study area (Figure 2). The removal of c.0.40m of plough-soil (3000) revealed a layer of red-orange alluvium (3002) over the whole of the trench. No archaeological features were identified cut into the alluvial deposit. The cleaning layer (3001) produced 14 sherds of pottery of varying dates (see Appendix).

The alluvium was machine excavated down to the natural gravels which were reached at a depth of 84.90m A.O.D. at the west end of the trench. The natural gravel sloped downwards slightly in the centre of the trench reaching a maximum depth of 85.31m A.O.D. towards the eastern end. The foot of the slope of the gravel knoll was visible, at the eastern end of the trench.

Trench D

Aligned east-west, c.50m long and 1.60m wide, Trench D was situated towards the southern boundary of the site. The plough-soil (4000) was removed by machine to reveal a red-orange alluvial deposit (4002) which occurred at a depth of c.0.40m below current ground level.

The alluvium was machine excavated to reveal the natural gravels. It varied in depth between c.0.15m at the western end and 0.40m at the east. The gravel occurred at a

maximum depth of 84.84m A.O.D. dipping slightly between the two ends of the trench, as in Trench C, and rising up again at the east end.

6.0 Discussion

The trial trenching failed to locate any archaeological features. The combination of surface finds and those excavated from the topsoil, however, suggests that the land was at least part of the early field systems around the Roman encampment, and then the Medieval settlement. The results of the evaluation suggest that settlement was based on the gravel knoll north of the site, and the alluvial river plain was used only for agricultural purposes.

Monitoring of development groundworks on the site, in the form of a watching brief, may be an appropriate mitigation response here, though a final opinion on the significance of the evaluation results must be sought from the County Archaeological Officer.

7.0 Acknowledgements

The evaluation was carried out by Roy Kracowicz, Kirsty Nichol and Jon Sterenberg. The illustrations were by Nigel Dodds, the finds analysis was undertaken by Iain Ferris who also edited the report and managed the project. Thanks are also due to Chris Welch of Staffordshire County Council Archaeology Office, Lynne Bevan for her specialist in-put, and John Lawton for his careful and precise machining.

8.0 References

Esmonde Cleary, A.S. and Ferris, I.M. 1996 *Excavations at the New Cemetery, Rocester, Staffordshire, 1985-1987* Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions, Vol. XXXV.

Jones, A. and Cuttler, R. 1995 *An Archaeological Evaluation at Orton's Pasture, Mill Street, Rocester, Staffordshire* BUFAU Report 128.01.

APPENDIX

The Finds by Iain Ferris with specialist flint identification by L. Bevan.

Trench	Context	Flint Prehistoric	Pottery Romano-British	Medieval	Post-Med. (up to 19thC)
A	1001		5	1	3
A	1006 (F1)		2		
B	2000		2		1
B	2001	1	2	4	2
C	3000		1		3
C	3001		3	2	9
D	4000				2
D	4001		1	1	
U/S		2	4	2	19
	Totals	**3**	**20**	**10**	**39**

Prehistoric

Three struck flints, a blade (2001), a core (U/S) and a retouched flake (U/S) that may have been intended to be worked into an arrowhead (L. Bevan pers. comm.) were recovered. None is diagnostic.

Romano-British

A total of 20 very abraded and fragmentary sherds of Romano-British pottery was recovered, including two mortaria sherds (4001 and U/S), one Samian fragment (3001), two Derbyshire Ware sherds (3001 and U/S), and a ?Nene Valley Colour Coat body-sherd. So abraded was the assemblage, and no diagnostic rim forms were represented, that it is only possible to say that there is nothing here that suggests the assemblage to be later than the second century.

The appearance of the pottery suggests that it is an 'outfield manuring scatter' rather than material derived from occupation activity on site.

Medieval

Ten possible Medieval sherds, glazed and unglazed, were recovered. All were small, highly abraded and undiagnostic.

Post-Medieval

Thirty-nine post-Medieval sherds were recovered including sherds of Blackware, Midlands Purple, and Slipware. All are probably Staffordshire products of the 16th-18th centuries. No diagnostic form sherds were recovered.

Modern

Modern pottery, glass, and brick appeared in the topsoil across the site in varying quantities. None of this material was retained after sorting.

Other Finds

From Trench C (3001) came a fragment of a sandstone whetstone, which may be Roman or Medieval in date.