

*BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY
FIELD ARCHAEOLOGY UNIT*

**Witton Hall, Erdington,
Birmingham**

**An Archaeological
Watching Brief 1998**

B.U.F.A.U.



Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
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An Archaeological Watching Brief 1998

by
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1.0: SUMMARY

This report describes the results of a watching brief in advance of a proposed housing development at the site of Witton Hall, Erdington (Fig. 1).

Observation and recording during the excavation of engineers' test pits suggested that activity on the site was of post-medieval date, quite probably associated with the primary occupation of the 18th-century Hall.

2.0: INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the results of a watching brief carried out at the development site of Witton Hall, located to the south of Brookvale Road and George Road, Witton, Birmingham (NGR SP 089917; SMR 01671). The work was undertaken in December 1998 by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit, on behalf of Demgate Holdings Plc.

In accordance with the guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance note 16 (November 1990), a recommendation for an archaeological watching brief was made by Birmingham City Council Department of Planning and Architecture, to be carried out during the excavation of engineers test pits.

The purpose of the watching brief was to record any features of archaeological significance exposed during the excavation of a series of the geotechnical test pits, and to determine the location, extent, date, character, significance and preservation of any archaeological remains potentially to be affected by the development.

3.0: THE STUDY AREA

The total area of the proposed development covers some 0.86 hectares (Fig.2). Witton Hall, in the northern part of the site, is to remain structurally intact, although is to be converted. The surrounding outbuildings, former gardens, tarmac surface and yards will be demolished. The construction of Witton Hall, as noted in the VCH (1964), is dated to 1730, and was most recently utilised as a community resource centre; it is now closed down. This is the oldest surviving building on the site, although the existence of an earlier building was suggested by documentary and historic map evidence.

A desk-top archaeological assessment by the Oxford Archaeological Unit was undertaken in 1995. This suggested that there was a medieval manor house at Witton on, or close to, the proposed development site; a two-storyed building on a map of 1725, also possibly on the same site; ponds in the west and south of the site in the 19th century; and buildings in the east of the site dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, where 20th century buildings are now situated.

In 1996 an archaeological evaluation comprising six excavated trenches was undertaken by Hereford and Worcester County Archaeological Service (hereafter H.W.C.A.S.). Four archaeological zones were identified: infilled ponds in the southwest of the site, probably associated with the gardens of Witton Hall; cobbled surfaces and brick drains in the east of the site, probably associated with the early occupation of the Hall; and to the south ditches and pits predating the 18th century, one of which produced a radiocarbon date of c.5000 Cal.B.C.. The only evidence of medieval activity on the site was a single sherd of late medieval pottery.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

A total of nine test pits and two test trenches was dug by mechanical excavator into the upper levels of the natural subsoil. These test pits were excavated in order to ascertain the nature of the subsoil prior to development and the laying of foundations. All ground disturbance was observed by an archaeologist. Cleaning of the sections within the excavated pits and trenches was carried out by hand where possible. This was followed by hand recording by means of printed pro-forma recording sheets and photographs where necessary.

5.0 WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

Test Pit 1

Test pit 1 measured 0.6m in width by 3.0m in length and was excavated to a depth of 2.2m. Here 0.6m of sandy-silt topsoil was removed revealing four courses of a brick wall stub (F100) oriented north-south. The bricks were set in a lime mortar, their individual dimensions (2.5 inches by 4.5 inches by 9 inches) similar to those of Witton Hall immediately to its south. A demolition layer of red sandy soil (1003), containing a lot of brick and tile rubble, approximately 0.5m deep, underlay the topsoil. The only identified artifact from this layer was a sherd from a white glazed stoneware vessel. The remnant brick wall was cut into a blue-grey sandy gravel deposit, the most recent of the natural strata.

Test Pit 2

Test pit 2 was L shaped in plan. Along its north-south axis it measured 0.6m in width by 5.0m in length by 1.5m - 2.0m in depth. Along its east-west axis it measured 0.6m in width by 7.5m in length by a maximum of 2.0m in depth. It was necessary to excavate this test pit in such a manner due to quite severe inflow of water during machining. This facilitated observation and recording of the stratigraphy down to natural subsoil. Under 0.2m of topsoil a substantial rubble layer, between 0.6m and 1.2m (1004), was exposed. This was made up of post-medieval brick, tile and ceramic pipe, incorporated in an ashy matrix. It may be that this was the result of a phase of infilling and levelling, perhaps of one of the brick built drains mentioned in the archaeological evaluation carried out by H.W.C.A.S.. This rubble layer overlay natural yellow-grey sandy gravel. There was no evidence of cobbled surfaces in any of the sections here, despite the proximity of this pit to the H.W.C.A.S. 'Trench 2'.

Test Pit 3

Test pit 3 measured 0.6m in width by 3.5m in length by 2.2m in depth. Under approximately 1.0m of black, loamy topsoil, in which were large fragments of blue dressed sandstone blocks and brick fragments, the blue-grey sandy gravel subsoil was encountered. There was no other artifactual evidence.

Test Pit 4

Test pit 4 measured 0.6m in width by 3.5m in length by 2.0m in depth. Under 0.85m of black loamy topsoil, natural blue-grey sandy gravel was exposed. No artifactual evidence was recovered.

Test Pit 5

Test pit 5 measured 0.6m in width by 3.0m in length by 2.2m in depth. Under 0.6m of black loamy topsoil, lay a 0.4m-deep deposit of natural yellow sandy gravel. Into this - identified in the south facing section - was cut a 0.2m deep by 0.2m wide, steep-sided feature, filled with topsoil. No artifactual evidence was recovered.

Test Pit 6

Test pit 6 measured 0.6m in width by 3.5m in length by 2.0m in depth. Under 0.8m of topsoil, a 0.3m thick band of natural yellow sandy gravel was exposed. Below this was the typical blue-grey sandy gravel. No evidence of archaeology was observed cutting these natural deposits.

Test Pit 7

Test pit 7 measured 0.6m in width by 3.5m in length by 2.0m in depth. Under 0.85m of black loamy topsoil was a clean deposit of yellow-orange sandy gravel, approximately 0.8m deep. There was no artifactual evidence to be recorded.

Test Pit 8

Test pit 8 measured 0.6m in width by 3.5m in length by 2.2m in depth. Under a modern surface of tarmac and crushed brick hardcore, a rubbly brick levelling layer (1005), approximately 1.0m deep, was exposed. This incorporated examples of the blue sandstone blocks and modern coping stones. This overlay a clean deposit of natural, yellow clay.

Test Pit 9

Test pit 9 measured 0.6m in width by 3.5m in length by 2.2m in depth. This was excavated through the length of the H.W.C.A.S. evaluation 'Trench 5'. This was an additional trial pit, deemed necessary by the structural engineer in order to ascertain the extent of the yellow clay deposit. Under 1.1m of trench backfill (1006), blue-grey sandy gravel was exposed; no artifactual evidence remained.

Trench 1

Trench 1 measured 0.6m in width by 4.0m in length by 2.0m in depth. Under a modern tarmac and crushed brick hardcore surface was a 0.3m-deep levelling layer of brick rubble (1005). Below this layer a 0.3m deep layer of black loamy soil (1007) was observed. It appeared to be a buried topsoil layer, under the rubble levelling deposits. This is one of two locations that were excavated with the aim of assessing the extent of the infilled pond features. The deposit is approximately the same thickness as that recorded in HWCAS Report 498 and lies at a similar depth. Underlying this deposit is natural blue-grey sandy gravel.

Trench 2

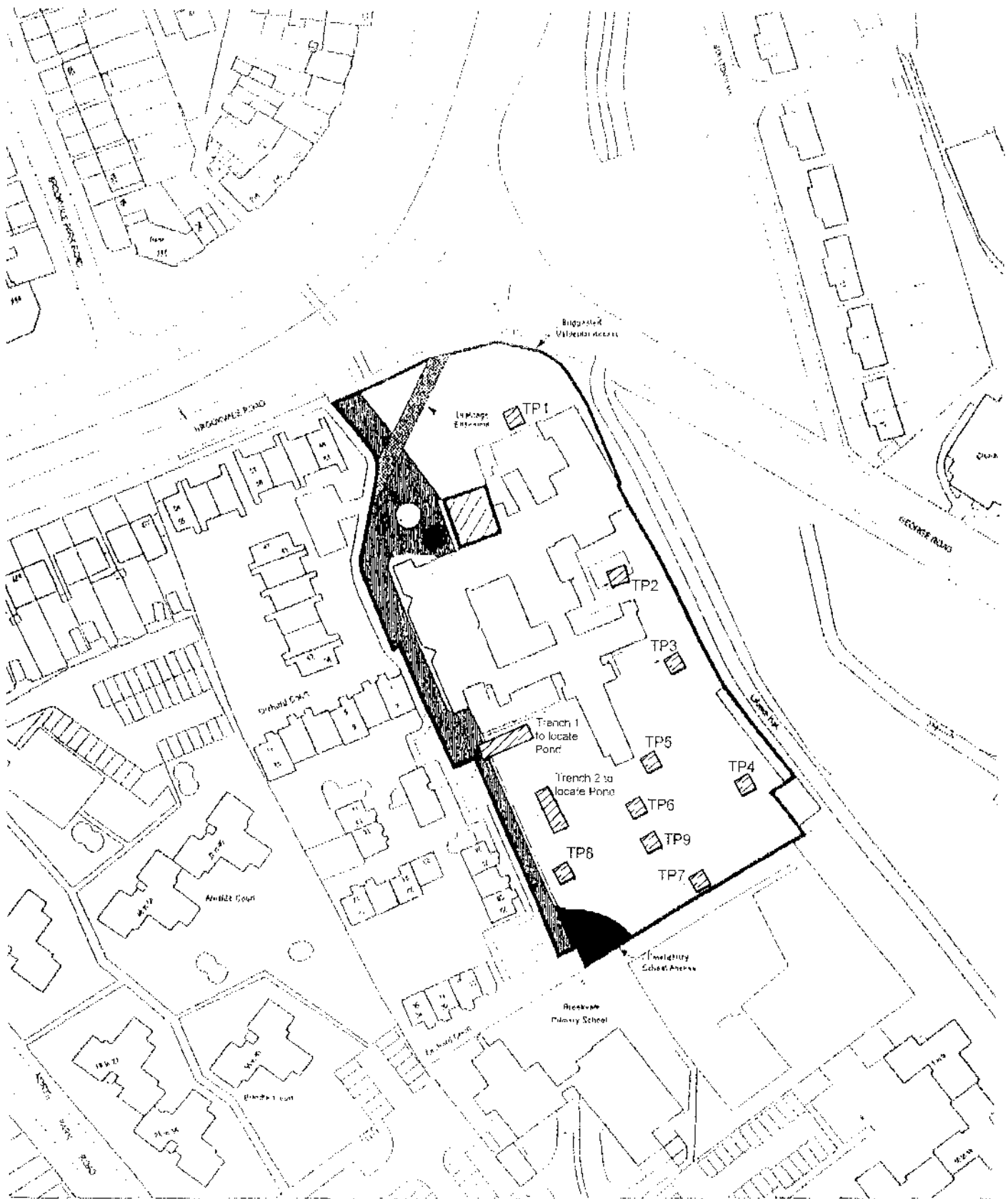
Trench 2 measured 0.6m in width by 7.0m in length by 2.2m in depth. Under the modern tarmac and crushed brick surface lay a 1.2m deep levelling layer of bricky rubble (1005), incorporating blue sandstone blocks and coping stones. This immediately overlay the natural blue-grey sandy gravel deposit. No evidence of the black silty loam deposit occurs here.

6.0 DISCUSSION

It appears that in recent times extensive levelling was carried out. This is suggested by the depths of both the rubble layers and of the topsoil in the south, southwest and east of the site. Artifactual evidence points only to post-medieval utilisation of the site, though evidence in Trench 1 of the buried horizon, and in Trial Pit 1 of the remnant wall, still suggest more extensive usage, associated with Witton Hall, than is currently understood. No evidence of Medieval or earlier utilisation of the site was evident during this watching brief.

7.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SCALE

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FIG. 2