An archaeological evaluation of land south of The Pavement, Brewood, Staffordshire.

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by
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Summary

An archaeological evaluation was undertaken upon land south of The Pavement, at Brewood, Staffordshire (NGR SJ 886 085), between 20th and 22nd December 1999. This followed a programme of test pitting and boreholing, in advance of a sewer installation. One of the test pits located potentially significant archaeological remains along the proposed route of the sewer. A single trial trench was excavated to further test the area's archaeological potential.

An extensive, waterlogged, archaeological feature, constructed from set logs, was found to be running across the proposed line of the sewer. Several sherds of later medieval pottery were recovered from immediately above this wooden structure. A number of environmental samples were collected from the waterlogged deposits to assess the potential of the site for the survival of paleoenvironmental remains.

Introduction *(Fig. 1)*

The following report details the results of an archaeological evaluation upon the proposed route of a relief sewer to be installed on land immediately adjacent to a road, known locally as 'The Pavement', at Brewood, Staffordshire (located at NGR SJ 886 085, *Fig. 1*). The evaluation was undertaken after a potentially significant archaeological feature was uncovered during a programme of test pitting and boreholing along the line of the proposed sewer. This evaluation was commissioned by South Staffordshire District Council, acting as agents for Severn Trent Water Ltd. and was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) between 20th and 22nd December 1999. The programme of trial trenching was based on an archaeological brief prepared by Christopher Welch, Principal Archaeological Officer for Staffordshire County Council (S.C.C. 1999).

Archaeological Background *(Fig. 2)*

The site lies within a low-lying field, located to the south of the road known as 'The Pavement' and east of the Coven Road, and through which flows a small stream. The ground is evidently marshy, and a variety of plant species grow within the field implying that there has been little agricultural improvement. Both the original 'Test Pit B' and borehole, which first revealed the archaeological remains, and BUFAU's subsequent evaluation trench lie a few metres southwest of the gated entrance into the field *(Fig. 2)*.

The report on the initial test pits describes the following:

"Organic deposits composed of soft damp black amorphous silty peat, clayey silts, silty clays, bands of soft to firm red brown grey sandy clays, clayey sands with some rootlets. Brick fragments were present beneath the topsoil in BHs 1 and 2 and TP B

to a depth of 2.00m., 1.20m. and 1.6m. respectively. In both BH 2 and TP B a layer of logs and sandstone blocks approximately 200 to 300mm thick forming a platform or raft was recorded at around a metre depth within the peaty materials." (S.C.C. 1999).

This quotation, extracted from the evaluation brief, was all that was known about the remains prior to the evaluation. The evaluation brief goes on to note that the County Sites and Monuments Record (S.M.R.) indicates the route of a Roman road nearby*(Fig. 1)*. This runs between a cropmark seen at Ackbury Heath and the Roman settlement of *Pennocrucium*, about 2km to the northeast of the site. However, the S.M.R. suggests that the road might have run along the present Port Lane and Tinker's Lane. It is pointed out that the present site lies in a more direct line between the two (S.C.C. 1999).

Aims

The objective of the proposed trial trench was to relocate the remains that exist in the area under consideration, originally found in Severn Trent Water's 'Test Pit B'. To then define their character, their likely extent and state of preservation, and to facilitate discussions regarding the need for preservation in any future potential development.

Method

A single trench was excavated, orientated northeast-southwest, adjacent to the location of 'Test Pit B'. The trench measured 15.0m in length and 1.0m in width. Two extensions were added at right angles to the original trench, both 1m wide, the northwestern extension being 1.5m long and the southeastern being 3.5m long. This trench formed a total sample area of approximately 20.0 sq.m, as required by the evaluation brief (S.C.C. 1999, 3).

The trench was located in relation to the National Grid referencing system using a Total Station Theodolite and the topsoil / modern overburden was then excavated under direct archaeological supervision, using a small mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.0m toothless ditching bucket. Upon location of the first 'significant archaeological deposit' the trench was cleaned by hand and examined for features. Any features found were sample excavated according to the guidelines stipulated in the evaluation brief (S.C.C. 1999, 3, 5.2).

The most significant feature found was the wooden structure itself. Its composite elements were sample excavated, allowing for the retrieval of material for potential analysis, either through dendrochronological or radiocarbon techniques. Environmental samples were then taken, corresponding to and supplementing all potentially datable materials.

All archaeological features within the trench were recorded using pro-forma record cards, supplemented by monochrome photography. A plan and section drawing of the trench was prepared at a scale of 1:20. Ordnance Survey datum levels were allocated to features and layers within the trench. Finds were bagged and numbered for further processing and analysis.

Results *(Figs. 2,3 and 4)*

These results fall into two key sections. The first is a description of the physical and stratigraphic characteristics and relationships of the deposits identified within the evaluation trench. The second is a discussion of the environmental data obtained from the same deposits.

Site Description

The earliest deposit identified during the excavation was a pale yellowish gravelly sand *(1010)*. This was recorded at a depth of 1.15m. within a sondage excavated at the southwest end of the evaluation trench. This was overlain by a black, organic, pebbly silt *(1006)* up to 0.45m. thick. Both of these deposits appeared to be natural in origin and both were waterlogged.

The wooden timber structure *(1002, 1003, 1005, 1013)*, found previously in Test Pit B, appeared to directly overlay the organic silts *(1006)*. However, due to waterlogging of the trench it was impossible to conclusively prove this relationship. The structure was first found at a depth of between 0.60-0.80m. and spanned a width of c.6.00m. *(Figs. 3-4)*. The make up of this structure is stratigraphically unclear since it was impossible to excavate a full section due to the flooding of the trench at this level. However, the structure had been constructed over a levelling dump *(1013)* of mid-light pinkish brown sand containing clusters of large sub-angular sandstone boulders (ranging in diameter from c0.10-0.20m).

This 'dumping' also formed the matrix, into which two bands of wooden 'logs' and 'poles' were set, orientated northeast-southwest. The lower of these *(1005)* formed a bed of larger 'logs', with a wider diameter (ranging from between 0.15-0.20m.). A second layer of wooden 'poles' *(1003)* lay on top of these (with a diameter ranging from between 0.05-0.10m). The wood was then partially sealed by a sand and sandstone matrix *(1002)* similar to the bedding layer *(1003)*. This upper layer of the sandy matrix was patchy, particularly in the southwestern area of the structure, and yielded a very small quantity of animal bone.

Both the 'poles' *(1003)* and the 'logs' *(1005)* had sharpened, faceted points, particularly on the protruding ends. This suggests that the wood was prepared and chopped to the right size by a bladed tool, probably an axe. The whole structure was set on a camber, sloping down from northwest to southeast, an overall drop of c.0.15-0.25m. The lowest part of the structure, in the southeast extension, was marked by a concentration of large sandstone blocks *(1012)* (c0.20-0.25m diameter). The relationship to the wooden structure was uncertain, as the blocks were submerged below the water table for most of the excavation. No pottery dating evidence was retrieved from this structure. It is also worth noting that the earlier test pitting damaged part of the southwestern extent of the structure.

The whole structure was sealed by a layer of highly-organic, stony black silt *(1004)*, c.0.20m in depth. Several fragments of pottery from this context has been provisionally dated the later medieval period (15th Century). This deposit was also waterlogged, and patches, especially in the southeast extension, contained a high

quantity of matted reed or straw-like material. Above this lay a dark brown, organic, silty subsoil *(1007)*, c.0.25m. in depth. This yielded some pottery and tile provisionally dated as late medieval (16th Century). These two layers may represent a series of medieval soil horizons.

The later medieval horizon *(1007)* was cut by a relatively modern 'land drain' *(F100 / F101)*. This in turn was sealed by a lighter orange-brown alluvial horizon *(1001)*, which lay under a very humic and damp, dark brown topsoil *(1000)*. These had a combined depth of between 0.20-0.45m.

Most of the natural depositional processes upon the site are related 'flooding events'. The level of flooding within the evaluation trench illustrated that the water table in the field south of 'The Pavement' was very high. This is due both to the low lie of the land and the proximity of the stream which follows the centre of the length of the field, orientated northeast-southwest.

Environmental Evidence

Environmental samples were taken to assess the potential of the deposits for the survival of biological remains (pollen, seeds, bone, insects, etc.). Samples were also taken to identify the wooden material used in the construction of the structure and to obtain radiocarbon dates.

The actual samples taken were as follows *(Figs. 3 and 4)*:

a) A 1.00m monolith of soil was taken from the northwest facing section of the evaluation trench, which represented the deepest peat deposit. Three bulk samples were taken in association with the monolith. These samples will be used to assess the preservation and potential of organic remains (notably pollen, plant macroremains and insects).

b) The wood of the structure itself was sampled at two key points. On the southwest exposed edge *(SF2)* and on the northeast exposed edge *(SF1)*. Further samples of the wood were taken from the remaining exposed area of the structure. These samples will be used to identify the species used in the construction of the structure, to study the applied woodworking techniques.

c) Further soil samples were taken from near the northeast and southwest edges. Those removed from the northeast were taken from below the structure; whereas those removed from the southwest were taken from the southeast facing section, and were in direct contact with SF2 (from contexts *(1004)* and *(1007)*). The comparison between these bulk samples and the monolith should help to tie the structure into the long sequence of the section.

d) Two samples, SF2 and its associated peat bulk samples, have been submitted for radiocarbon dating. When the results are obtained they will be added as an appendum to this report. Dendrochronological dating has been ruled out as the logs were not sufficiently large or well preserved.

Pottery and Tile

The following provisional identifications and dating are based upon comments provided by Stephanie Ratkai.

(1004)-Fragment from a lid seated jar (possibly from a cistern). Four smaller fragments maybe from the same vessel. The group probably dates to the 15th century and is probably from Nuneaton.

(1007)-Three fragments of pottery were recovered. One is 15th century and may derive from the same vessel as the fragments from *(1004)*. Of the other two, one is a fragment of 15th century Cistercian ware or blackware and the other is a fragment of 16th century coarse ware. Six fragments of flat roof tile and a brick fragment were also recovered from this context.

Discussion

One possible interpretation of the wooden structure is that it is a trackway designed to cross the marshy area adjacent to the stream. This is supported by the orientation of the 'logs' and 'poles' which indicate that it ran in a northeast-southwest direction. Its apparent continuation beyond the edges of excavation, would also support this. It may have led to a ford or crossing over the stream to the southeast. Its fairly crude construction might suggest some sort of farmers 'droveway'. The date of this structure remains uncertain until the radiocarbon dates from the wood samples become available. Until then the only dating evidence available is the few sherds of medieval pottery in the deposit overlying the structure.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the construction of the structure is quite solid. This suggests that it may have been built for medium or long term use. However, its width would make it a very large track merely for 'farm use'. This has led to speculation that it may be a form of ritual track, perhaps of prehistoric date. Certainly precedents for these causeways, sometimes known as sweetways can be found elsewhere (in the Southwest for example), although it would be highly unusual within a West-Midlands context. Nevertheless, if the radiocarbon dates corroborate this theory the site could well be of national importance.

It is also worth addressing the original suggestion, that the structure may represent a Roman road, related in some way to the cropmark at Ackbury Heath and the Roman settlement of *Pennocrucium*. Although known Roman roads exist running along Port Lane and Tinkers Lane *(Fig. 1)* it has been suggested that this site may be along a more direct route (S.C.C. 1999). However, in the absence of any direct dating evidence this remains unproven.

The only remaining evidence in support of the structure being prehistoric or Roman is that its orientation does not appear to correspond with the layout of roads and field boundaries within the rest of Brewood. Brewood is a town with a well-documented history, at least since the medieval period, and these aspects of its layout have remained relatively unchanged since then.

Another possibility is that the structure represents a foundation platform for a small building, possibly a barn or animal shelter, within a grazing paddock. This is broadly supported by the apparent concentration of larger sandstone blocks towards the edges of the structure and in the southeast extension *(Fig. 4)*. Alternatively the structure may be a form of 'ground consolidation' for the soft marshy area in which it is set.

However this seems highly unlikely, the potential 'marshland' covers most of the field. By contrast, the structure's width spans a relatively small area, and could not cover all of the soft ground in this field.

Recommendations

On balance it seems most likely that the structure is a wooden trackway of late medieval date. Hopefully this will be clarified when the radiocarbon dates are obtained. Whatever the date or function of this feature it is obviously of some archaeological significance. It is, however, proposed by the client that the site be developed according to the present plan. There must therefore be a fully resourced archaeological mitigation strategy, developed to run in tandem with any further ground disturbance upon the site. The section of the sewer trench that will bisect the structure should be excavated by hand, by archaeologists. This will supplement the archaeological evidence to date, by facilitating a further environmental sampling strategy, and allowing a deeper section to be recorded, which should clarify any stratigraphic ambiguities. Finally there should also be further investigation into the true extent of the feature, involving the archaeological stripping of an area around the sewer cut. This will aid in fully understanding the function of the structure.

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List of figures

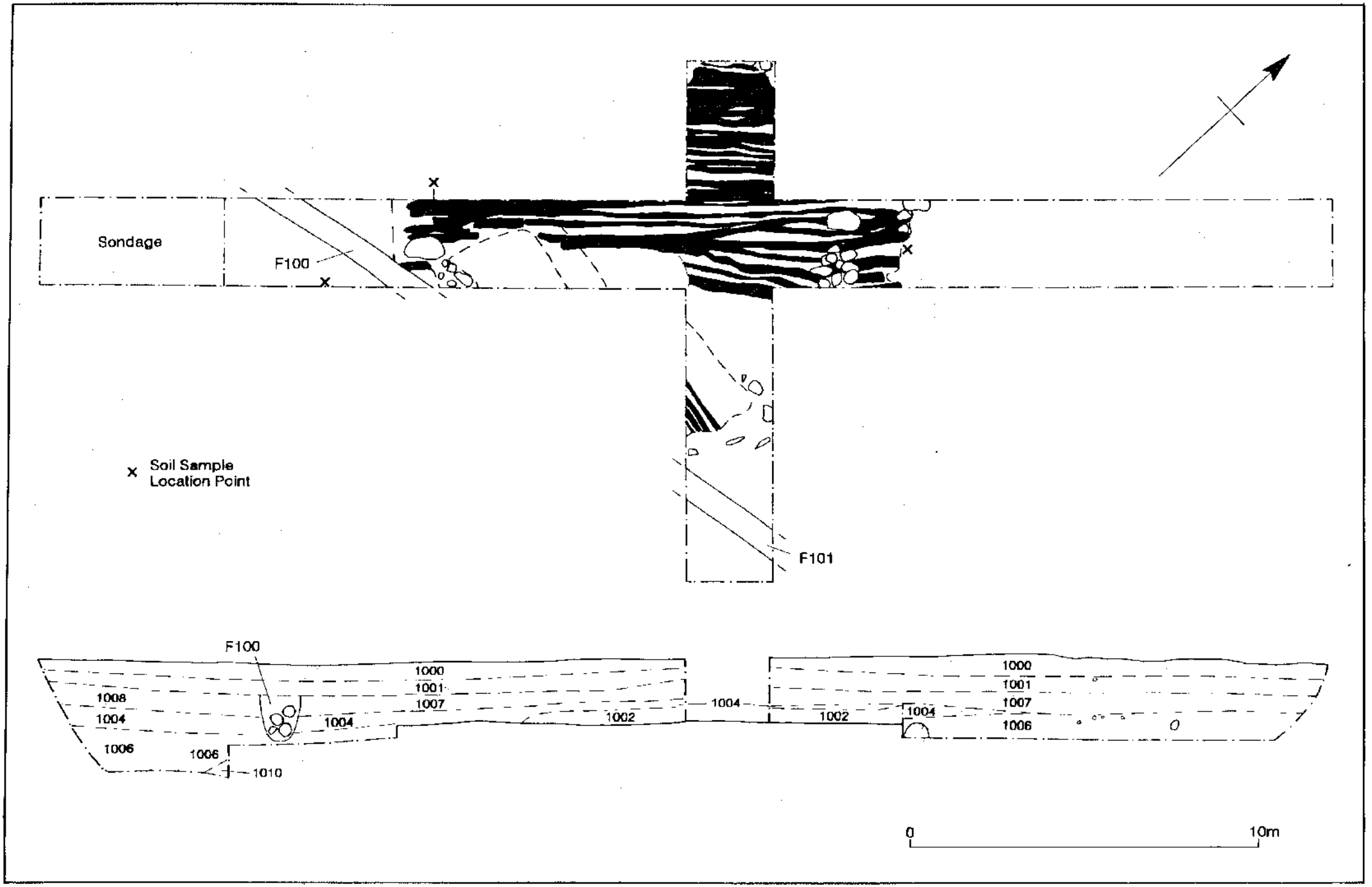
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Fig.3