An Archaeological Trial Trench Evaluation Wasing Lower Farm Woolhampton, Berkshire Phase 5

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An Archaeological Trial Trench Evaluation Wasing Lower Farm, Woolhampton, Berkshire Phase 5

by
M. Duncan

For further information please contact:
Simon Buteux, Iain Ferris or Gwilym Hughes (Directors)
Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
The University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 2TT
Tel: 0121 414 5513
Fax: 0121 414 5516
E-Mail: BUFAU@bham.ac.uk
Web Address: http://www.bufau.bham.ac.uk

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1.0 Summary

An archaeological trench evaluation was undertaken by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) at Wasing Lower Farm Woolhampton, West Berkshire between 25th October 2001 and 6th November 2001. The evaluation was commissioned by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Limited on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Limited. The evaluation was undertaken in the context of an application for planning permission for an extension to the existing quarry at Woolhampton. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the potential survival of significant archaeological deposits within the area, of approximately 5 hectares, designated for a new processing plant. In total 11 trenches were excavated, each 30m long and 1.8m wide. The stratigraphy in all of the trenches was similar, with substantial layer alluvial clay overlying the gravel deposits. Peat formation immediately above the clay was revealed in several of the trenches. No archaeological deposits or finds were encountered within any of the trenches.

2.0 Introduction

The archaeological evaluation described below was undertaken following submission of a planning application by Lafarge Aggregates Ltd for an extension to the existing quarry at Woolhampton. This extension will encompass an area of *c* 118 hectares at Wasing Lower Farm, Woolhampton, West Berkshire. However, pre-determination archaeological evaluation was required only for the Phase 5 area, an area of *c* 5 hectares, designated for a new processing plant; this is the subject of the present report. It is intended that subsequent stages of evaluation will be carried out post-determination. A desk-based assessment of the area of proposed development (Richmond 2001) indicated that the Phase 5 development had slight potential for the disturbance of material of archaeological significance.

The evaluation was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit between 25th October 2001 and 6th November 2001. The work was commissioned by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Limited on behalf of Lafarge Aggregates Limited. Veronica Fiorato, of the West Berkshire Heritage Service, visited the site to monitor the excavations on behalf of West Berkshire Council 31st October 2001.

The archaeological evaluation was conducted in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists Standard and Guidance for Field Evaluation (Institute of Field Archaeologists 1999) and a specification prepared by Phoenix Consulting Archaeology Limited (Richmond 2001).

The site archive is currently held at Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit. It will be deposited with the appropriate repository, within a reasonable time of the completion of the evaluation.

3.0 Site Location and Description (Fig. 1)

The Phase 5 area is located at the northeastern corner of the proposed quarry extension. This area is a roughly rectangle piece of land, 260m by 220m, covering approximately 5 hectares, centred on NGR SU 5780 6543. The site, in agricultural use at the time of the evaluation, is bordered by the wooded valley of the River Enborne to the north, and by agricultural fields on its other sides. It has a gentle slope from southwest to northeast and an altitude of 55m-56m. At the time of the evaluation, a band of saplings, some 25m wide, cut across the site on a roughly north-south orientation.

4.0 Archaeological Background

Prior to the evaluation described here, the area of the proposed quarry extension at Wasing Lower Farm had been the subject of various archaeological investigations, including desk-based assessments and fieldwalking programmes. Although there was no direct evidence for archaeological remains in the Phase 5 area itself, significant indications of probable and possible archaeological sites had been noted in the surrounding fields. The Phase 5 area was thus considered to have archaeological potential, particularly as no previous intrusive investigation had taken place.

A comprehensive assessment of the archaeological potential of the proposed quarry extension is detailed in the desk-based report (Richmond 2000) and will not be repeated in detail here. However, a brief summery of the archaeological potential of land around the Phase 5 area is appropriate. A series of cropmarks have been identified from aerial photographs in fields to the west of the Phase 5 area. These are particularly evident on a low gravel ridge that crosses the centre of the area of the proposed quarry extension on a roughly northwest to southeast alignment. Such slightly higher, better-drained land would have been favoured for settlement in the past, and the absence of thick alluvial deposits is conducive to the production of cropmarks. Although the dates of these cropmarks are not well defined, it is thought that some could represent activity of prehistoric, Roman or medieval date (Richmond 2001). Although there are no major concentrations of archaeological finds suggestive of intensive activity, finds from the surface of the fields surrounding the Phase 5 area, collected both during fieldwalking projects and as chance finds, suggest some archaeological activity to the south and the west of the area dating from the prehistoric period through to medieval times (Richmond 2001).

5.0 Aims and Methodology

5.1 Aims

The main objective of the archaeological evaluation was to determine the location, extent, date, character, condition, significance and quality of any surviving archaeological remains in the Phase 5 area. The evaluation also aimed to provide information to allow the formulation of a mitigation scheme for further archaeological investigation in advance of, or during, development, where appropriate.

5.2 Methodology (Fig. 2)

As there was no indication of a specific location or concentration of any archaeological activity within the boundaries of the site, a series of 11 trenches was excavated at evenly spaced intervals across the site. The position of one trench (number 9) was slightly altered from the positioning set out in the specification (Richmond 2001) in order to avoid the plantation of saplings which crossed the site; this did not significantly affect the even coverage of the trenches. Each trench was 30m long and 1.8m wide. They were dug by a mechanical excavator, under archaeological supervision, to the depth of the gravel horizon, or to the safest maximum depth, depending on the conditions of each trench.

The excavation was hampered by high ground water, which led to the relatively rapid flooding of many of the trenches following excavation. However, there was sufficient time to observe and record each trench prior to flooding, and a pump was used to empty each trench for further recording where necessary and prior to backfilling.

Each trench was excavated in stratigraphic sequence, with the surfaces of the subsoil and underlying alluvial clay mechanically exposed, prior to removal of these deposits down to the level of the underlying gravel. This allowed the possibility of archaeological features and deposits overlying, within and beneath the alluvial clay to be observed. In several cases ground conditions and safety considerations prohibited the excavation of a trench down to the level of the gravel along the whole of its length. In such cases, where practical, shorter sondages were excavated to investigate the full stratigraphic sequence. The different soils within each trench were stored separately. On completion of the excavation, the trenches were mechanically backfilled, with the soils returned to the trench in the sequence in which they were excavated.

Recording was carried out using pre-printed *pro forma* record cards, supplemented by plans, sections and monochrome print and colour slide photography.

6.0 Results

Trench 1 (Plate 3)

Trench 1 was on a north-south alignment, the northern end adjacent to the wooded valley of the River Enborne. This trench was excavated to a depth of 1.3m along most of its length. The natural gravel horizon (1002) was only reached in parts of the trench due to the groundwater conditions. The gravel was sealed by a heavy grey alluvial clay (1004), a maximum of 0.8m deep, which in turn was overlain by a layer of chalky silt (1003), which had a maximum depth of 0.15m. Overlying this was a light brown subsoil (1001), with a maximum thickness of 0.25m. The topsoil (1000), a maximum of 0.35m deep, sealed the subsoil. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 2 (Fig. 3)

Trench 2 was aligned east-west and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.4m. The trench was excavated to the depth of the gravel horizon (2002). This was sealed over the extent of the trench by a layer of heavy clay (2005), that had a maximum thickness of 0.4m. Overlying this was a layer of chalky silt (2004), 0.25m deep. Above this layer was a layer of peat (2003); this extended for only 10 metres over the eastern end of the trench and had a maximum depth of 0.2m. Sealing this layer, and partially sealing 2004, was a layer of brown silty subsoil (2001), 0.4m deep, in turn sealed by the topsoil (2000), 0.3m deep. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 3

Trench 3 was north-south aligned and was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.6m. Due to the depth of the stratigraphy, the trench was not excavated down to the gravel over its full extent; the gravel deposits (3002) were only partially exposed at the southern end, for a length of 2m. They were sealed by a layer of compact grey clay, which was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.7m. A layer of dark brown organic silt (3004), which had a maximum depth of 0.4m, sealed this. The silt was in turn sealed by a layer of chalky silt (3003) that extended 13 metres over the northern end of the trench and had a maximum depth of 0.2m. Covering this layer, as well as 3004, was a layer of brown silty subsoil (3001) with a maximum depth of 0.4m. This layer was considerably deeper at the southern end of the trench. Sealing the extent of the trench was the topsoil, 0.25m deep. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 4

Trench 4 was aligned east-west and located near the eastern edge of the site. It was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.3m, where the natural gravel horizon (4001) was reached. Overlying the gravel was a layer of clay (4003), 0.8m deep at its maximum thickness. At the eastern end of the trench, the clay was sealed by a 0.2m thick layer of peat (4004). Both 4003 and 4004 were sealed by a deposit of chalky silt (4002), a

maximum of 0.1m deep. A layer of topsoil (4000), with a maximum depth of 0.3m, sealed the extent of the trench. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 5 (Fig. 3)

Trench 5 was close to the western edge of the site and was aligned east-west. This trench was excavated to a maximum depth of 1.2m, on to the gravel horizon (5002). Overlying this was a layer of clay (5004), which had a maximum depth of 0.6m. Above this was a layer of chalky silt (5003), a maximum of 0.1m in depth. Above this was a layer of brown silty subsoil (5001), a maximum of 0.3m deep. The topmost layer trench was the topsoil (5000), which had a maximum thickness of 0.3m. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 6

Trench 6 was located near to the centre of the site and had a north-south alignment. This trench was excavated to the gravel horizon (6001), at a maximum depth of 1m. The gravel was sealed a layer of clay (6003) which had a maximum thickness of 0.5m. Overlying the clay was a 0.2m-thick layer of chalky silt (6002), which in turn was overlain by the topsoil (6000), which had a maximum depth of 0.3m. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 7

Trench 7 was aligned east-west and was situated towards the middle of the site. The trench was excavated to the depth of the gravel horizon (7004), which gradually became deeper towards the west of the trench, at a maximum depth of 1.1m. Above the gravel was a layer of clay (7003), a maximum of 0.5m deep. Above the clay was a layer of chalky silt (7002), which had a maximum depth of 0.2m. Above this was a layer of silty subsoil (7001), which was a maximum of 0.1m thick. Above this was the topsoil (7000), a maximum of 0.3m in depth. No archaeological deposits were encountered during the excavation of this trench.

Trench 8

Trench 8 was located in the southwest corner of the site, was aligned north-south and excavated to a maximum depth of 1.2m. The trench was excavated to the horizon of the gravel (8001), which was overlain by a layer of clay (8003) with a maximum depth of 0.5m. This in turn was sealed by a layer of chalky silt (8002) that had a maximum depth of 0.3m. A layer of topsoil (8000), a maximum of 0.3m in thickness, sealed the trench. No archaeological deposits were encountered during the excavation of this trench.

Trench 9

Trench 9, on a north-south alignment, was located towards the southern end of the site, and excavated to a maximum depth of 1.1m, where the natural gravel (9001) was reached. The gravel was sealed by a layer of clay (9005), a maximum of 0.5m deep. Overlying the clay in the centre of the trench was a lens of peat (9004), 6.5m wide and 0.15m deep. Sealing both 9004 and 9005 was a dark brown organic silt deposit (9003), which was a maximum of 0.1m thick. This was overlain by a layer of chalky silt (9002), which was a maximum of 0.2m in depth. Above this was the topsoil (9000), a maximum of 0.3m in depth. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 10 (Plate 4)

Trench 10, on a north-south alignment, was excavated to the natural gravel (10000), at a maximum depth of 1.7m. The gravel was sealed by a deposit of clay (10005), which had a maximum depth of 0.45m. Overlying the clay was an undulating layer of peat (10003), approximately 0.15m deep over the majority of the length of the trench. The peat became considerably deeper towards the southern end of the trench, where it was excavated to a maximum depth of 0.9m. . The peat was overlain by a layer of chalky silt (10004), which was 0.1m thick at its deepest. The overlying topsoil (10001) had a maximum depth of 0.3m. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

Trench 11 (Fig. 3)

Trench 11 was located in the southeast corner of the site and excavated on an east-west alignment. The trench was only excavated to the natural gravel horizon (11000) in a 3m-long sondage, and was located at a maximum depth of 1.5m. The natural gravel was sealed by a layer of clay (11005), 0.9m at its thickest, which in turn was overlain by a layer of peat (11003), 0.2m deep, covering the full length of the trench. This was sealed by a layer of silty subsoil (11002), a maximum of 0.1m deep. The topsoil (11001) had a maximum depth of 0.3m. No archaeological finds or deposits were encountered within the trench.

TABLE 1 - SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Trench No.	Trench Alignment	Depth of Trench (m)	Clay (m)	Peat (m)	Organic Silt (m)	Chalky Silt (m)	Subsoil (m)	Topsoil
1	N-S	1.30	0.80	-	-	0.15	0.25	0.35
2	E-W	1.40	0.40	-	-	0.25	0.20	0.40
3	N-S	1.60	0.70	-	0.40	0.20	0.40	0.25
4	E-W	1.30	0.80	0.20	-	0.10	-	0.30
5	E-W	1.20	0.60	-	-	0.10	0.30	0.30
6	N-S	1.00	0.50	-	-	0.20	-	0.30
7	E-W	1.10	0.50	-	-	0.20	0.10	0.30
8	N-S	1.20	0.50	-	-	0.30	-	0.30
9	N-S	1.10	0.50	0.15	0.10	0.20	-	0.30
10	N-S	1.70	0.45	0.90	-	0.10	-	0.30
11	E-W	1.50	0.90	0.20	-	-	0.10	0.30

7.0 Discussion

Although the stratigraphic sequence varied from trench to trench, there are sufficient elements in common to describe the overall stratigraphic sequence as a whole. In all of the trenches substantial deposits of clay overlay the gravel deposits. This clay is an alluvial deposit present on all the lower ground in the northern and eastern part of the land at Lower Wasing Farm (McRae 2000). The depth of the clay was variable, from 0.4 to 0.9m thick, but was generally deepest towards the northern and eastern edges of the area. Peat formation immediately above the clay was revealed in four of the trenches, with a major concentration revealed in Trenches 9, 10 and 11 in the southeastern part of the site. Again, the depth of the peat was very variable, from 0.15 to 0.9m. The variability in the depth of the alluvial clay and the patchiness of the peat formation above it is no doubt due to complex Post Glacial depositional processes, including such possible factors as buried palaeochannels and, with regard to peat formation, the variability of the water table at the site. A survey of the soils at Lower Wasing Farm (McRae 2000) suggests that the presence of peat, while concentrated on the low-lying areas, is generally patchy.

All bar one of the trenches had a layer of chalky silt deposits overlying the peat or clay. This calcareous material can be identified as algal marl (McRae 2000). Subsoil was identified in a number of the trenches. It is likely that this subsoil probably developed due to the wet conditions (McRae 2000). The trenches show that the topsoil within the area is of roughly the same quality and depth.

No direct evidence of human activity was encountered in any of the trenches, and the archaeologically 'sterile' character of the deposits was noted in all cases. However, the problems of flooding did limit observation in some cases, and the possibility of archaeological remains, particularly of the early Post-Glacial period, cannot be eliminated

altogether. It is considered that observation and recording of such potential remains would be best undertaken in the form of a watching brief during soil stripping prior to development or mineral extraction.

8.0 Acknowledgements

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9.0 References

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