Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit
Project No. 921
December 2002

Archaeological Observations at Bordesley Abbey, Redditch, Worcestershire
Fieldwork Reference Number 31907

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Contents

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Summary

Improvement work at Bordesley Abbey (SAM261 SP06NW1 WSM00010), Redditch Worcestershire (centred on NGR SP 0464 6874), commissioned by Redditch Borough Council, entailed the erection of a fence around the site in order to enclose the major earthworks of the abbey complex. It was considered that this scheme of work could disturb archaeological deposits relating to the scheduled ancient monument. Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit was commissioned to carry out a programme of archaeological work in order to fulfil the aims of the County Structure Plan (Hereford and Worcester County Council 1993: policy CTC5), the district local plan (Wychavon District Local Plan 1993: policy CB18) and as mitigation for scheduled monument consent (Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979). All groundwork carried out in the course of the improvement was monitored by a qualified archaeologist and all stratigraphy revealed was recorded. Mike Glyde, on behalf of Worcestershire County Council, and Ian George, on behalf of English Heritage, monitored this work.

Generally the fence was placed in order to avoid any major archaeological deposits. The stratigraphy revealed during the excavation of the postholes, on average 0.25m in diameter and 0.6m deep, demonstrated that over much of the site there is a general demolition layer, surprisingly sparse for such a large abbey complex. Presumably this is due to the systematic way in which the abbey was dismantled in 1538 following its dissolution. Masonry was identified in some of the postholes; this was left in situ and the fence moved in order preserve the integrity of the structures. Little can be said of these walls, other than that those to the south west of the main complex may be the remains of a water management system for the abbey, and those on the south side of the fence may represent the southern wall of the south range. The majority of the stratigraphy was sealed by a good build-up of topsoil, 0.25m deep. This only varied in areas of recent disturbance, for example over a spoil heap from the excavation of the gatehouse. Generally the stratigraphy demonstrated good in situ preservation of the remains of Bordesley Abbey.

1.0 Introduction

This report details the results of a programme of archaeological work undertaken at Bordesley Abbey (SAM261 SP06NW1 WSM00010). A scheme of works was undertaken to erect a boundary fence at Bordesley Abbey (NGR SP 0464 6874) for Redditch Borough Council which could potentially disturb archaeological deposits relating to the abbey. An archaeological watching brief was required in order to fulfil the aims of the County Structure Plan (Hereford and Worcester County Council 1993: policy CTC5), the district local plan (Wychavon District Local Plan, 1993, policy CB18) and as mitigation for Scheduled Monument consent (Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979). Ian George, on behalf of English Heritage, and Mike Glyde, on behalf of Worcestershire County Council, monitored this work. The

archaeological work was carried out by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) in 2002.

2.0 Location (Figs. 1 and 2)

The Bordesley Abbey precinct is now owned by Redditch Borough Council and is at present in the main covered with a thick carpet of grassland meadow vegetation. The site of Bordesley Abbey is situated within the valley of the River Arrow, to the north of Redditch town centre and to the east of the A441 (the Alvechurch Highway). The buildings of the Forge Mill Museum and the Bordesley Abbey Visitors' Centre are directly to the south of the site.

The line of the new fence surrounds the major visible earthworks of the abbey complex. It is positioned 25m to the south and 35m to the west of the present fence which encloses the excavated remains of the abbey church, and abuts the existing field boundaries to the north and east.

3.0 Geology and Topography

The solid geology consists of Triassic Marl over lain by alluvial deposits from the River Arrow. No natural deposits were positively identified during the course of this watching brief, although to the eastern end of the site a horizon of possible alluvial deposits was encountered.

The site of the abbey grange lies on a gradient sloping downwards from north to the south within the valley of the River Arrow (Rahtz and Hirst 1976). Substantial earthworks are visible over the area of the abbey complex, which covers approximately 36 hectares; these distort the natural topography of the area, which has been substantially altered by human activity.

4.0 Historical and Archaeological Background (Fig 3 and Appendix 2)

An SMR search was undertaken as part of the requirements of the archaeological brief (Glyde 2002). A pertinent selection of the results of this comprise Appendix 2. Bordesley Abbey is a site of significant archaeological and historical interest. The known history and the excavated archaeology have revealed a relatively detailed picture of Bordesley Abbey in the past. A brief summary of this will be presented here.

There is little evidence to suggest Prehistoric, Roman or Saxon activity within the area covered by the watching brief; due to the poor nature of the land, it seem unlikely that this area would have been utilised (Wright 1976). It seems that major activity started on the site with the construction of Bordesley Abbey, a Cistercian abbey founded in the mid-12th century, which appears to have enjoyed a generally wealthy history until its dissolution in 1538 when it was efficiently and systematically dismantled (Wright 1976).

Following the dissolution it seems that the land was used for grazing and has not been substantially disturbed other than by the construction of Forge Mill, directly to the south of the precinct, and its associated watercourses. In the early 19th century it was noted that some excavation had been undertaken at Bordesley Abbey, although it is unclear when this took place (Walsh 1976). In 1864 excavation of the abbey by Woodward enabled a detailed description of the abbey (Walsh 1976).

A comprehensive series of surveys and excavations has been carried out over the area of the abbey precinct from the 1960s until the present. Various parts of the abbey precinct have been excavated (see Fig. 3). Briefly, this work comprises investigation of the following areas:

- BAA. During the 1960s a series of archaeological excavations took place in order to assess the potential for archaeological remains; these were mainly based around the main abbey chapel (Hirst and Wright 1989). This area has been extensively and systematically excavated to reveal the form and function of this building (Astill 1989).
- BAB. The excavation of the abbey mill revealed the development of industry on the site with extensive waterlogged preservation (Astill 1993).
- BAC. Pre-monastic ridge and furrow has been identified, a discovery important in understanding the early medieval settlement of this site (Burrow and Dyer 1976).
- BAD. A small excavation through what was thought to be a fishpond revealed buildings underneath (Astill 1993).
- BAE. A transect of the valley was excavated in order to further understand this area of the abbey precinct, and revealed the complex nature of the water management in this part of the precinct (Astill 1993).
- BAF. This excavation again investigated water management on the site and added evidence for the shifting of the course of the River Arrow during the lifetime of the abbey.
- BAG. The gatehouse chapel, at the entrance to the precinct, was the only part of the abbey to avoid the dissolution and is important in understanding the interaction between the Cistercian monks and the outside world (Astill 1989).
- BAH. This area was excavated in order to investigate the millrace and determined the nature of the water management on this part of the site and the high potential for waterlogged remains (Astill 1993).
- BAJ. Further investigations into the water management in this area uncovered part of the millrace (Astill 1993).
- WSM 03915. Trial trenching prior to the building of the Visitors' Centre revealed no archaeological activity, but did demonstrate the deep stratification of alluvial deposits (Edwards 1990).

The new fence is sited around the earthworks of the main abbey church and associated claustral buildings, including the excavated area of the church. The fence was sited in the hope of avoiding any significant archaeological deposits relating to the abbey, although it was anticipated that archaeological information obtained from the postholes may further illuminate the history of the monastery.

The fence is also sited in the vicinity of Forge Mill, an 18th-century iron works, later a needle works and now a museum. It was anticipated that archaeological deposits

relating to early industry could possibly be encountered in the course of the watching brief.

5.0 Aims

The aim of the watching brief was to identify any *in situ* archaeological and palaeoenvironmental remains that may be present below the ground surface, and to prevent the destruction of any significant archaeological deposits that may be disturbed during the contractors' groundworks.

Specific objectives were to:

- monitor any ground-breaking activity in the development area for the purpose of locating and recording any deposits or remains which may have survived.
- sample and recover any contextual evidence which may assist in the interpretation of such remains.
- consider the significance of any such remains in their local, regional, national or international context as appropriate.
- report upon and make public, as appropriate, the results of any such discoveries.

6.0 Method

The groundwork consisted of the excavation by hand of 127 postholes, each assigned a unique number. The fencing contractors carried out the hand excavation under the supervision of a suitably qualified archaeologist. A record of the stratigraphy revealed in each posthole excavated was made on *pro forma* record cards, supplemented by scale drawings and photographs. These, along with the artefactual remains recovered, comprise the site archive and will be deposited with an appropriate museum.

7.0 Results (Fig. 2 and Appendix 1)

All of the postholes that were fully excavated were circular in plan, measuring 0.25m in diameter and dug to a maximum depth of 0.6m. In the main, the postholes were excavated at a spacing of 2.75m from centre to centre. This spacing varied only for the posts of the two gates that were inserted along the line of the fence. These were postholes 107-111, which were square, 0.5m wide and generally cut to a depth of 0.6m, although 109 was only excavated to a depth of 0.25m

Postholes 1-16, on the western arm of the fence, were located on a hill sloping upwards to the north. The holes cut through a layer of brown silt and sand in each case, of which a depth of 0.35m was revealed. These deposits contained a layer of roof tiles at the top of the layer, directly below the topsoil. The highest concentration of tile along this stretch of fence was in posthole 5, with decreasing amounts of tile in the postholes to the south and north. Postholes 6-16 also revealed a quantity of broken pieces of pink sandstone, only one of which was noticeably worked. The

depth and quality of the topsoil in these postholes was homogenous; it was 0.25m deep and consisted of a sandy clay and silt held together by the turf.

Postholes 17, 18, 107, 108 and 117-126 were located further up the slope to the west of the abbey, and connected with a hedgerow running to the north of the abbey. Only the more northerly of this line of postholes (17, 18, 108, 117-122) exposed the subsoil; they were devoid of any finds. The topsoil became gradually deeper towards the north of this line of postholes.

Located at the southwest corner of the fence line were postholes 19 and 20; these were not fully excavated and the line of the fence was moved in order to avoid this area. Sandstone blocks were revealed below the topsoil in these postholes. The blocks were laid horizontally and were larger in plan than the postholes. The sandstone block in posthole 19 appeared to be faced on the south-facing side; beyond this little more can be said of the physical characteristics of these deposits.

Extending along this slightly altered fence line, postholes 21-31 start in a low dip in the topography, go over an incline and back down to a lower level. Posthole 21 was excavated down onto a horizon of compact grey clay with some silt and sand. This and the other postholes were excavated through a layer of subsoil. This was loose and sandy with pieces of broken tile and sandstone fragments throughout. The sandstone fragments became especially numerous in postholes 22, 24-27 and 29 and 30. These were located over the rise in the ground. The pink sandstone had no evidence of worked faces or mouldings, and in general was highly abraded. Two sandstone pieces in the south facing section of posthole 27 may have been structural, although these were not excavated and their full extent was not revealed. The topsoil was also shallow over this area, especially in postholes 25-27 where it was reduced to the depth of the turf (0.15m).

Only the topsoil was removed in postholes 32-37, 39 and 109. This was because a horizon of sandstone blocks was encountered below the topsoil. These were recorded in plan only and left *in situ*.

Postholes 40-43 and 109-111 were excavated through a layer of friable brown sandy silt with small pebbles throughout. Throughout this layer in these postholes were broken fragments of pink sandstone and pieces of tile. These were mainly concentrated at the top of the layer, below the topsoil. The topsoil over these postholes was 0.25m deep and comprised of a humic sandy silt held together by the turf.

Postholes 44-48 were excavated along a relatively flat surface. The stratigraphy in these postholes was relatively uniform. They were dug through 0.35m of a dark brown, friable sand and silt with pebbles throughout. There were some roof-tiles within this layer. These contexts were sealed by a topsoil, 0.25m deep.

Located on an incline, downward to the south, the subsoil layer revealed within postholes 49-53 consisted of a sandy silt with pebbles, with chunks of abraded pink sandstone and tiles throughout. This layer was sealed by topsoil, although in postholes 50, 51 and 52 this topsoil became noticeably thinner and consisted mainly of the turf.

The excavated stratigraphy changed in postholes 54-56. Postholes 55 and 56 were excavated onto a layer of compact beige clay with sand silt and some pebbles. Above this was a layer of compact sand and silt with clay and pebbles; this also encountered in posthole 54. All of these postholes contained fragments of broken tile, and in posthole 56 there was a high concentration of roof tile at the top of the layer, directly below the topsoil. The topsoil in these postholes was 0.25m deep and consisted of a humic sand clay and silt with turf.

Postholes 57-60 were cut through similar distinctive stratigraphy. This consisted of a compact dark brown sand silt and clay with flecks of lime throughout. Some tile was present. These contexts were excavated to a depth of 0.35m below the topsoil. The topsoil in these postholes was generally a dark brown compact humic sand, silt and clay with turf.

Postholes 61-90 were excavated along a gently undulating stretch of the fence line. These postholes were excavated onto a horizon of loose sand gravel and pebbles. Above this was a layer of friable brown silt sand and pebbles. Fragments of roof tile were evident in all of these postholes; these were concentrated at the base of the deposit in posthole 83. Medieval potsherds were recovered from postholes 63 and 64. These postholes were sealed by a layer of topsoil, which was brown, friable, humic sand and silt with turf.

Postholes 91-106 and 112-116 carried along the same line as the previous numbered postholes. Postholes 93, 94, 96, 97, 99, 103 and 104 were excavated onto a horizon of compact grey clay with silt and sand; there was some charcoal flecking evident within this. Above these horizons and present in postholes 91-106 and 112-116 were layers of brown compact sand clay and silt with pebbles throughout. Postholes 96-99 contained quite a high quantity of roof tile fragments; otherwise very little artifactual evidence was retrieved from these layers. These postholes were sealed by a layer of topsoil with a higher clay content than those excavated on the rest of the site.

8.0 Discussion

Due to the small size of the postholes, the stratigraphic information gathered from their excavation was necessarily limited. However, relating the results to the research that has already been carried out on earthworks in the area of the fence can shed some light on the stratigraphy recorded.

The concentration of tile and stone rubble directly below the topsoil in postholes 4-15 seems to be an indication of a destruction layer to the west of the main abbey complex. This most probably relates to the dissolution of Bordesley Abbey.

Referring to the plan of the earthworks surveyed by Aston and Munton (1976; see Fig. 4) some comment may be made as to the nature of the stratigraphy uncovered in the course of the watching brief. Postholes 19, 20 and 21, at the south west corner of the fence line, uncovered seemingly *in situ* masonry. On discovery, this was left and the fence moved around it. It is possible that this masonry relates to a stone built

channel which is though to have provided an inlet for the water supply to the abbey (Astill *pers. comm*.).

The large amount of broken rubble encountered in postholes 22-30 can most probably be attributed to a post dissolution mound of destruction material (Aston and Munton 1976). It is though that this occurred when the possible gatehouse structure was excavated at some point in the past (Wilson *pers. comm*.).

The apparent *in situ* walls encountered in postholes 31-39 and 109-111 could very well be part of the southern wall of the south range identified by Aston and Munton (1976), although the extent to which this masonry was exposed reveals little about the nature of the construction.

The pottery recovered from postholes 63, 64, 93 and 98 could indicate an area of deposits laid down at the time of the occupation of the abbey, rather than related to the destruction of the buildings. It is of note that these pottery sherds were found exclusively in the area of the refectory. possibly indicating good archaeological preservation in this area of the abbey complex.

The postholes were sited in order to avoid any substantial archaeological deposits. The majority of the fence seems to be situated in areas to do with the water supply for the main abbey buildings. Although no obvious structures or features related to the use of these channels were uncovered in the course of this watching brief, it may be noted that silty clay deposits encountered in the bottoms of some of the postholes (93, 94, 96, 97, 99, 103 and 104) could be alluvial in nature, relating to the water management system of the abbey.

Over the majority of the postholes the topsoil present was relatively undisturbed with a good build-up of topsoil sealing the archaeology. This indicates that the site is well preserved, post dissolution, with a high potential for significant stratigraphy. The only place in which the topsoil cover was poor was from posthole 21 to 30, which would seem to confirm the suggestion that this area had been previously excavated.

Based on the evidence from the postholes excavated it would seem that the archaeological remains present are in good condition, having been relatively undisturbed since the reformation.

9.0 Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Gillian Wilson and all the staff at Bordesley Abbey Visitors' Centre and Forge Mill Museum for their advice and assistance. Thanks are also due to Grenville Astill for his helpful comments and suggestions. Ian George of English Heritage and Mike Glyde of Worcestershire County Council monitored the work for their respective organisations. The Worcestershire County Council Sites and Monuments Record were helpful in providing access to the documentary records. Thanks are due to Kate Bane, Mary Duncan and Erica Macey (BUFAU) for their work on site. Bryony Ryder undertook the illustrations and Simon Buteux managed the project and edited this report.

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