

**The Windmill Shopping Centre,
Smethwick, West Midlands**

**An Archaeological Watching
Brief
2004**

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The Windmill Shopping Centre, Smethwick, West Midlands (SMW SC204)

An Archaeological Watching Brief, 2004

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For

Carillion

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Windmill Shopping Centre, Smethwick, West Midlands An Archaeological Watching Brief, 2004.

Summary

Watching briefs were undertaken for Carillion at two sites during groundworks connected with the development of the Windmill Shopping Centre, Smethwick, West Midlands (NGR SP 02758790). Areas along the frontage of the High Street and Windmill Lane were targeted owing to the potential for archaeology highlighted by an Historic Landscape Appraisal of the development area (Hislop 2004). No archaeological deposits prior to the 19th century were identified in the course of this work. It is possible that any early remains that may have existed along the High Street were completely destroyed by levelling of this area in the 19th century. However, the deposits investigated along the Windmill Lane frontage suggested that the ground level had been built up in the 19th century, thereby protecting any potential archaeological deposits. The lack of any evidence for occupation along this frontage would suggest that the area was not occupied prior to the 19th century.

1.0 Introduction

As part of the planning consent obtained by Modus Properties Ltd for the redevelopment of the Windmill Shopping Centre, Smethwick, West Midlands, archaeological watching briefs were undertaken in two areas. These were recommended by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council and were carried out by Birmingham Archaeology. The watching briefs centred on groundworks relating to the excavation of trenches for service runs adjacent to land along High Street and the clearance of subsoil along the Windmill Lane frontage.

2.0 Site Location and Description (Figs 1 & 2)

Smethwick is located on the South Staffordshire plateau, at the southeastern tip of the pre-1974 county bordering Warwickshire. The underlying geology is mainly sandstone and drifted boulder clay. The study area is located within the centre of Smethwick, Sandwell MBC, West Midlands, centred on NGR SP 02758790. It comprises most of the street block formed by Suffrage Street (north), High Street (south), Windmill Lane (east) and Corbett Street (west).

3.0 Archaeological and Historical Background

A full assessment of the archaeological and historical background of the site had been undertaken previously (Hislop 2004), a brief overview of the results of which will be presented here. No previous archaeological work had been undertaken in the study area prior to the programme instigated in 2004 in response to the redevelopment of the Shopping Centre. Nor has the limited work carried out in the vicinity of the study area revealed any significant archaeological deposits earlier than the 19th century. Historical documentation reveals that Smethwick has existed as a small village since at least 1086 when it formed part of the episcopal manor of Lichfield. It is probable that the population was small and stable, mainly centred on Bearwood Hill probably up to the 19th century. The cartographic evidence suggests that the Windmill Shopping Centre study area consisted of farmland until the mid-19th century when the

site and its surrounds were subject to massive residential urban development. The pattern of development recorded on the historic maps suggested that pockets of archaeological deposits relating to the pre- 19th-century settlement of Smethwick might have survived within the development area.

4.0 Objectives

- ♦ Establish the presence/absence of any archaeological remains within the specified areas
- ♦ Determine the extent, condition, nature, character, and date of any archaeological remains encountered
- ♦ Locate identify and assess the state of preservation of any archaeological remains encountered
- ♦ Determine the origins, method of construction, development and spatial organisation of the now demolished buildings within the specified areas
- ♦ Provide information to further understand the origins and development of Smethwick and the status and lifestyle of the inhabitants
- ♦ Place these remains within their local, regional and national contexts
- ♦ Determine whether the remains are of sufficient merit to warrant statutory protection

5.0 Method

The method used in order to achieve these aims as specified in the Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2004) was the monitoring of all of the contractor's groundworks within the specified areas by a suitably qualified archaeologist. The archaeological record consisted of drawn plans at a scale of 1:20, and sections at a scale of 1:10, in addition to 35mm photography.

6.0 Results

6.1 Site 1 (High Street)

A series of service trenches was excavated along the High Street frontage. The trenches ran roughly east-west and followed the line of High Street before turning to the north at Corbett Street which terminated the site to the west. The trenches were a maximum width of 2.5m wide and 1.0m deep.

The predominant stratigraphy was relatively shallow with the natural subsoil encountered at a depth of only 0.6m below the ground surface (Fig 3, Sections A & B). It consisted of compact purple-red sand natural subsoil banded with orange-yellow sand-gravel (1002). A shallow levelling layer of dirty red-brown silt-sand (1001), that acted as a levelling layer across the site, overlay this in turn. The surface was mainly landscaped with concrete floor tiles and turf (1002). The stratigraphy generally sloped east-west following the slope of High Street down the hill.

The stratigraphy was only disturbed at the western end and eastern ends by the former location of 19th century terrace houses. The brick foundations were relatively shallow and usually less than a metre in depth from the surface. Associated with these buildings were a series of former service runs. However, these disturbances did not

truncate the natural layers severely. There was no discernible evidence for features pre-existing the 19th-century activity along High Street.

6.2 Site 2 (Windmill Lane) (Fig.4)

An area of land along the Windmill Lane frontage, directly to the northeast of the Bingo Hall, was stripped under archaeological supervision. This area was roughly triangular in shape, 38m long and 30m wide. The ground level was reduced by a maximum of 1.3m.

The natural subsoil was encountered at a depth of 1.2m below the deepest stratigraphic deposits. It consisted of compact purple-red sand natural subsoil banded with orange-yellow sand-gravel (1008). The overlying stratigraphy sloped down towards the frontage of Windmill Lane to the east (Fig. 3, Section C). The earliest of these layers (1006) consisted of a brown-green silt and had the appearance of a buried soil. This was only present intermittently in the northeast corner of the site. Cut into this was a series of brick footings (F100), presumably the remains of 'Larkfield', the mid-19th-century house that stood on the site until the Second World War. Above this was a general levelling layer consisting of compact grey silt with rubble inclusions throughout. Three large underground fuel storage tanks were identified in the southwest corner of the site. Overlying the site was a layer of black clinker. Various pieces of tarmac concrete and associated hard landscaping as well as various services were the latest additions to this site.

7.0 Conclusions

The main conclusion to be reached from the examination of these areas was the absence of evidence of activity prior the 19th century. The relatively shallow depth of deposits along the High Street frontage might be a reason to suspect that the 19th-century work was associated with a scouring operation. Normally, 19th-century activity results in at least some form of levelling, but there appeared to have been a complete absence of such activity. Alternatively, the surrounding area is on a ridge of sandstone and this would mean that relatively little groundwork would be necessary in the 19th century in order to construct foundations.

Along the Windmill Lane frontage the build up of 19th-century deposits away from the road would suggest a purposeful operation to raise the ground level in this area. A clue to the reason for this can be found on the 1886 map, which depicts the house called Larkfield situated on a small hill. This could suggest that any archaeological activity prior to this event might have been preserved in this area. However, as no deposits or artefacts dating from before the 19th century were encountered it seems unlikely that there was any earlier activity in this area.

8.0 Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was carried out by Christopher Hewitson at the High Street site, and by Mary Duncan and Leonie Driver at the Windmill Lane site. This report was written by Christopher Hewitson and Mary Duncan, and edited by Malcolm Hislop who also managed the project for Birmingham Archaeology. The illustrations were prepared by Nigel Dodds.

9.0 References

Birmingham Archaeology 2004 *The Windmill Shopping Centre, Smethwick: Historic Building Recording and Archaeological Watching Brief* Written Scheme of Investigation.

Hislop, M. 2004 *The Windmill Shopping Centre, Smethwick, West Midlands An Historic Landscape Appraisal, 2004* Report No. 1153.



Fig.1

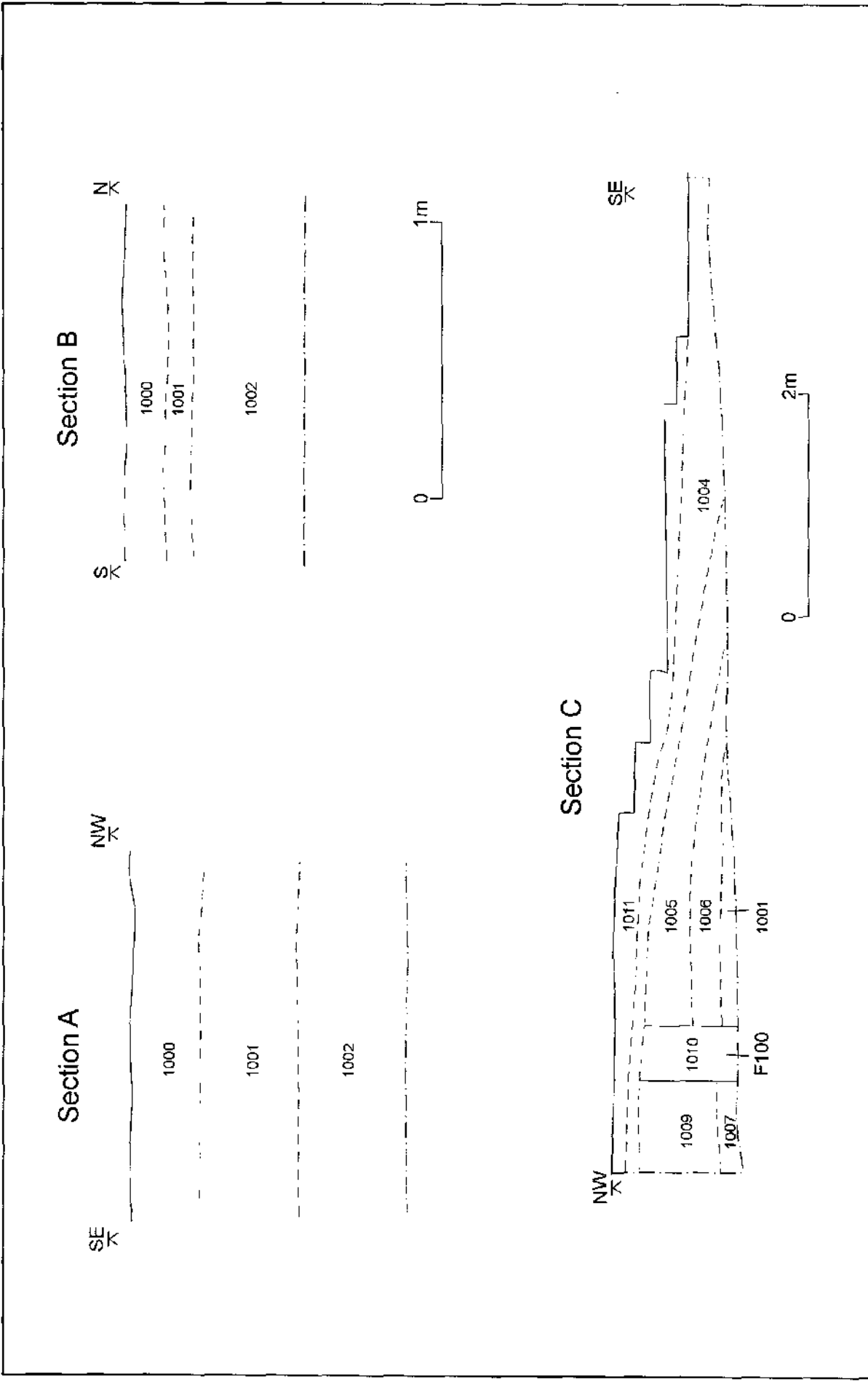


Fig.3

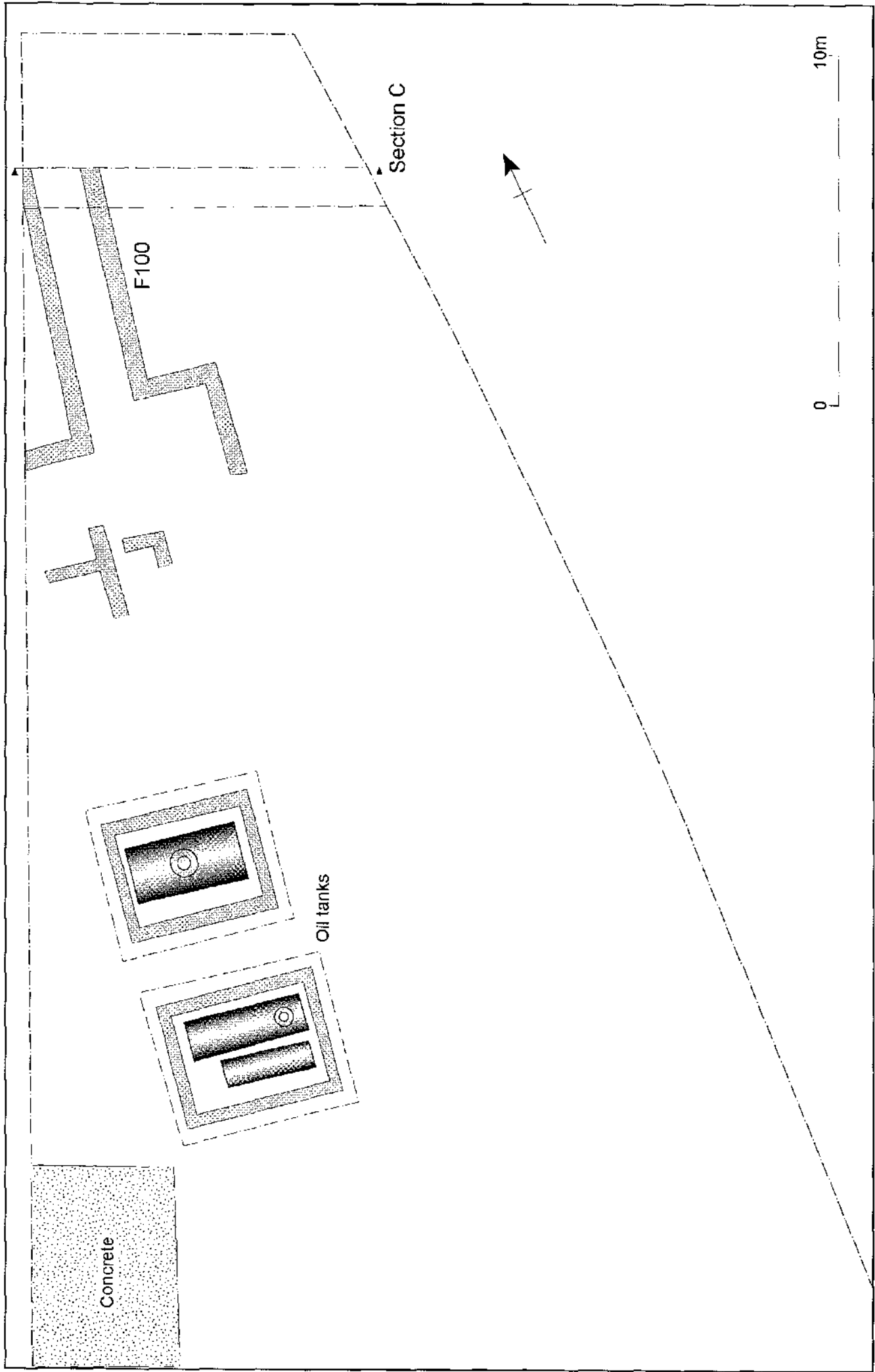


Fig.4