

**Friary Retail Park,
The Green, Forebridge, Stafford:
Summary Report for
An Archaeological Watching
Brief 2004**

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by

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Summary

Following the discovery of human remains on the site of the Friary Retail Park, Wolverhampton Road, Stafford (centred on NGR SJ 92370 22800), by groundworkers, during the excavation of footings for new retail units, a programme of archaeological monitoring was implemented. The burials were concentrated along the western periphery of the site, and had survived due to ground levels being raised up, probably in the 18th century. The earliest deposit was what appeared to be a buried soil, which contained pottery that has preliminarily been dated to the 13th century. A total of three graves had been cut through this layer, and it is likely that they were associated with a house of Austin Friars, part of the Augustinian monastic order which was endowed in 1344 by Ralph, Lord Stafford. The position of the arms, and the absence of coffin furniture within the grave fills suggest that they were simple shroud burials, lying supine with heads at the west end of the grave. All three had been truncated to varying degrees by a northwest-southeast aligned post-medieval ditch. Parts of two more individuals were recovered by groundworkers from a construction trench, and small quantities of disarticulated human bone were collected from other deposits across the site. The condition of the bone was relatively good given the acidic nature of the underlying natural sands. In consultation with the Principal Historic Environment Officer for Staffordshire all artefacts and the site archive will be deposited with Stoke City Museum until further funding can be secured for full post-excavation analysis.

Background to the Project

Following the discovery of human remains on the site of the Friary Retail Park, Wolverhampton Road, Stafford, by groundworkers, during the excavation of footings for new retail units, a programme of archaeological monitoring was implemented. Archaeologists were commissioned to monitor further groundworks and record and remove all other burials that were unearthed. The area to be monitored was on the western side of the development area within the footprint of Retail Unit 2 and included all service trenches in the immediate vicinity. Due to the nature of the work it was agreed, in consultation, with Ian Wykes, Principal Historic Environment Officer for Staffordshire, that all artefacts recovered during the course of the monitoring exercise would undergo only the preliminary washing and stabilising stage of the post-excavation process. Thus, the archive will be deposited with Stoke City Museum until further funding can be secured for full post-excavation analysis. This summary report outlines the preliminary findings from the site.

Historical Background

The Green in Stafford is first referred to in documents dating to 1304, and is believed to have been a small parcel of land rising out of the marsh to the south of the Green Bridge. It lay within the district of Forebridge, on the southern bank of the River Sowe, just outside the line of the medieval defences. The district of Forebridge occupied an important communications nodal point at the junction of several routeways leading southwards to the medieval towns of Newport, Lichfield and Wolverhampton, and it is most likely that this is at least partly the reason for the siting of the Hospitals of St John and St Leonard here. As well as the two hospitals there was also a house of Austin Friars, part of the Augustinian monastic order. Land on The Green was endowed to the Black Friars in 1344 by Ralph, Lord Stafford, 'whereon to found a church, dormitory, rectory and other necessary buildings' (Roxburgh 1948). That there was a cemetery associated with the Friary church is highly likely, and Edmund (5th Earl of Stafford) is known to have been buried in the Austin Friars Church, Stafford, upon his death in the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1403. Following the Dissolution of the monasteries in 1538 the site and its contents were sold off to a Thomas Neve and Giles Isam. However, the graveyard area appears to have been fairly extensive, with the result that human remains have been encountered both on and in the vicinity of the site during redevelopment of the area from the late 19th century onwards (Watts, 2000, 4).

Results

Stratigraphy

The burials were concentrated along the western periphery of the site, and had survived due to the amount of build up that had occurred when early ground surfaces had been raised up for later occupation. The earliest deposit encountered on site was what appeared to be a buried soil, a dark brown loamy silty-sand, that probably represents the original medieval ground surface and which contained pottery that has preliminarily been dated to the 13th century. The grave cuts were only clearly defined at a relatively low level, when the bottom fill, which was a mixture of the natural red sand and the dark loam appeared in contrast to the loam horizon. This is almost certainly evidence of the graves being backfilled 'as dug' and it is therefore likely that they were cut through the loam horizon. The buried soil also contained disarticulated human remains. This medieval layer was overlain by two distinct post-medieval levelling layers. The earliest was a brown silty sand that contained a single creamware sherd dated to the 1770s-1780s, which was overlain by a 0.6m thick levelling layer containing rubble that probably dated to the 19th century.

Skeletal Remains

A preliminary assessment of the skeletal remains suggests that there was a minimum of five individuals recovered from the site, however further analysis will be needed to clarify this. Three graves were revealed cut into the underlying natural subsoil, they were on an east-west alignment with the individuals' heads at the western end of the grave. Parts of two more individuals were recovered by groundworkers from a construction

trench for Retail Unit 2, and small quantities of disarticulated human bone were collected from other deposits across the site. The condition of the bone was relatively good given the acidic nature of the underlying natural sands.

Human Burial 1 (HB1, Plate 1) was an articulated adult, lying in a supine position with arms flexed across the waist. Pottery from the burial comprised a single whiteware jug sherd, with an olive green glaze and combed decoration, which has been preliminarily spot dated to the mid-13th-14th century.

Human Burial 2 (HB2, Plate 2) was an articulated adult, lying in a supine position with arms crossed across the pelvic region. Pottery from the burial comprised sherds of 13th century cooking pots, and a fragment of what may have been daub, middle Saxon pottery, or Iron Age cooking pot.

Human Burial 3 (HB3, Plate 3) was an articulated adult, lying in a supine position with arms flexed across the waist. The lower part of the torso and legs had been greatly disturbed, and there were post-depositional cuts to some of the long bones. The majority of these bones had been re-interred in a small pit where the lower torso had been cut. There was also an interesting pathology in the bone of the upper jaw, probably the result of an abscess on the tooth. Pottery from the burial comprised sherds of cooking pots, a whiteware sherd and a fragment of a whiteware jug with olive green glaze. All have been preliminarily spot dated to the mid-13th-14th century.

The position of the arms, and the absence of coffin furniture within the grave fills suggest that they were shroud burials. The three graves had all been backfilled with a mid red-brown silty sand which was undoubtedly composed of a mixture of the medieval soil layer and the underlying natural red sand. All three had been truncated to varying degrees by a northwest-southeast aligned post-medieval ditch.

The remains of Human Burials 4 and 5 (HB4 and HB5) were collected by groundworkers and are represented by fragments of skull and disarticulated bone. However, the cranium of HB4 is in remarkably good condition.

In addition to the inhumations on the site there was also an incomplete and disarticulated horse burial in an adjacent pit. The remains included fragments of shoulder blade, ribs, vertebrae and the skull. It is worthy of note here that horse burials were also excavated (although further to the east than the latest area of monitoring) during an earlier programme of trial trenching on the site (Coates *et al.* 2001, 10).

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Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3