

Darlaston Regeneration
An Archaeological Desk-Based
Assessment

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SUMMARY

An archaeological desk-based assessment was carried out in August 2005 along the route of a proposed road scheme in Darlaston, near Walsall, West Midlands (centred on NGR SO 990980). The proposed road scheme involves the realignment of Bentley Mill Lane and the construction of a new east-west road to the south of the River Tame. The road scheme also follows part of Darlaston Road to the south.

A previous desk-based assessment, conducted for the Darlaston Strategic Development Area, concluded that the area as a whole was probably not initially developed prior to the closing stages of the eighteenth century, though the area spans much of the core industrial area which established Darlaston's importance and reputation as a regional and national centre for mining and the manufacture of metals and metal goods from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century (Conway, 2002).

Two statutory listed buildings were identified within the vicinity of the proposed new road, the James Bridge Aqueduct (BCSMR 2694) and the Globe Inn (BCSMR 1555). Neither are directly affected by the development, but it has been highlighted that care should be taken to avoid damage to these buildings from vibration or undermining by any adjacent ground works. The road also transects embanked portions of the Walsall Canal and the Anson Canal, part of the extensive Birmingham Canal Navigations, which are themselves the dominant historic feature of the area.

Where the proposed road transects the areas of land previously undeveloped to the south of the River Tame, no evidence has been discovered to suggest that below-ground archaeological remains are present.

The history and development Darlaston, and the Black Country in general, is greatly influenced by the natural mineral resources of the area and the construction of man-made infrastructure that helped utilise these resources. Due to the degraded character of the site, the development will have a moderately positive effect on the visual environment, and be of itself part of an ongoing history involving new and improved infrastructure that has been occurring for over 200 years.

DARLASTON REGENERATION: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESK-BASED ASSESSMENT, 2005.

1 INTRODUCTION

In August 2005 Birmingham Archaeology carried out an archaeological desk-based assessment in respect of a new road scheme in Darlaston, near Walsall, West Midlands (hereinafter referred to as the study area). The work was commissioned by JMP Consulting in advance of a proposed new road scheme.

This report outlines the results of the assessment, which was prepared in accordance with the Institute of Field Archaeologists *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment* (IFA 1999). The results of a previous desk-based assessment (Conway 2002), which was concerned with a wider area, has been incorporated into this report.

The assessment conformed to a Written Scheme of Investigation (Birmingham Archaeology 2005, Appendix 1), which was approved by the Local Planning Authority prior to implementation, in accordance with guidelines laid down in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 (DoE 1990).

2 LOCATION AND GEOLOGY

The proposed route follows part of Darlaston Road, then realigns Bentley Mill Lane on the east bank of the River Tame, with an east-west link which is located to the south of the east-west aligned part of the River Tame in Darlaston, near Walsall, West Midlands. The site is roughly centred on NGR SO 990980 (Fig. 1, 2).

The drift geology of the area is mainly characterised by boulder clays. Alluvial deposits, however, are found around the river and stream corridors. The underlying solid geology is mainly composed of coal measures. Darlaston is situated on the South Staffordshire coalfield and the seam of 'thick coal' or 'ten yard coal' outcrops in the vicinity (Conway 2002, 2).

The present character of the site is mostly brownfield, with 50% being classed as derelict, though the new east-west road cuts through some of the only green and semi-natural land within the development area.

3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The principle objective of the project is to define the likely extent, survival and significance of above and below-ground archaeological remains within the study area. It will also determine the need for any further archaeological work in advance of or during the development.

This information will be used to inform a mitigation strategy for future archaeological work on the site (see Section 7 below).

4 METHODOLOGY

A search of all relevant and readily available published and non-published documentary sources, including historic maps and photographs, was carried out in the Walsall Local History Centre and the Library of the University of Birmingham. The Black Country Sites and Monuments Record, the main source of archaeological information for archaeological sites in Walsall, was also consulted (Fig. 3).

In addition, a walkover of the study area was undertaken in order to assess the topography and any above-ground archaeology, including standing buildings.

5 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

5.1 Anglo-Saxon

The settlement of Darlaston may have had its root in the Anglo-Saxon period, as the place-name 'Darlaston' is Anglo-Saxon in origin (DCHP 1984, 3). The earliest known archaeological deposits in the Darlaston area date to the medieval period.

5.2 Medieval

Darlaston is not mentioned in the Domesday Book, this may be because no settlement existed at this date or could merely be one of the many omissions from the survey. By the thirteenth century Darlaston had become established as a settlement, which was probably focused, as today, on the area around Church Street and King Street, to the south-west of the proposed route. Closer to the south-west is Darlaston Green. This was not a 'village green' in the proper sense but more probably an extensive area of waste or heathland on the edge of the town (Timmins 1993, 13, 56). Also highlighted by the DSDA assessment was an area known as 'The Flatts', which was part of the town's medieval open field system. The pattern of strip-cultivation indicative of open field survived in this area into the mid-nineteenth century (Conway 2002).

5.3 Post-medieval

The area remained largely undeveloped into the middle of the nineteenth century despite the fact that the Darlaston area was rich in mineral resources such as coal, ironstone and fireclays (VCH 1968, 285). Much of the common land of Darlaston and Tittensor was enclosed under an act passed in 1828 (Whites History Gazetteer and Directory of Staffordshire 1834). The industrial development of Darlaston, like much of the Staffordshire Black Country, was hampered by its relative isolation. The absence of navigable rivers meant bulky raw materials, such as coal, could not be easily transported from the area (Conway 2002,4). The development of Darlaston relied heavily on the deliberate construction of infrastructure such as the canals and the railways.

The arrival of new transport links stimulated the industrial development of the area and facilitated the exploitation of the mineral resources present within the area. Darlaston was connected to the extensive Birmingham Canal Navigations in 1799 and the Grand Junction Railway was cut through the area in 1837 (ibid.).

The arrival of the canal to the area did not lead initially to much industrial development. The Tithe Map of Darlaston parish (Fig. 4) shows that several basins were cut from the canal into what were undeveloped areas during this period. These basins were presumably constructed to serve factories or mines, which were planned but not yet established. It was only after the railway arrived and was linked to the canal in the 1840s that large-scale industrial development seems to have taken place (Conway 2002).

Within the Midlands two public railways met in Birmingham, the Grand Junction and the London and Birmingham. They formed a junction in 1838, which cemented the link with the North West and created the embryonic national network. Birmingham became an early focus point for new railways. By 1842 four lines converged on the town, but none served Black Country industry (Foxton 1998, vii). Darlaston was exceptional as it was served by the Grand Junction Railway.

The canal network and the railway network were linked in 1845 when an early interchange basin, known as Darlaston Green Goods Station, was constructed at Bughole Bridge. Darlaston became an important centre of coal and ironstone mining in the early to mid-nineteenth century (DCHP 1984, 8). Mining in Darlaston was mainly carried out by cutting numerous small-scale workings using the rib and pillar system (DCHP 1984, 10). Large collieries, such as the James Bridge Colliery to the east of the site, were exceptional in the area.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century mining began to be complemented by the production of iron and steel in particular. Many furnaces and sheet mills, which took advantage of the coal and ore resources of the area, grew up around the established mines and the railway and canal. A further development away from primary manufacture toward the production of finished metal articles occurred in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century (Conway 2002). The mainstay of Darlaston's manufacturing trades was nuts and bolts and the town became a national centre for their manufacture. Many of the firms thrived and grew to become major manufacturers.

In summary, the earliest tangible industrial development in the area followed the construction of the canal in 1799 and the construction of the Grand Junction railway in 1837. Early industry was focused on the primary extraction of coal, ironstone and to a lesser extent, limestone.

6 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDY AREA

To the north of the proposed north-south road, to the north of James Bridge, is Bentley Mill (BCSMR 5388). It lies near to the confluence of Darlaston brook and the northern branch of the River Tame. In 1239, Thomas Lord of Darlaston granted to Will de Bentley, all watercourse between Darlaston and Bentley to make a mill. The mill was built and remained in the Bentley family for at least 40 years. In 1304 Will de Bentley died leaving 1 mill, though it is not certain it is the same mill. In 1408 the mill was owned by John Ashley and in 1412 by Nicholas Ruggeley. Bentley post-medieval mill (BCSMR 5389) is located north of the River Tame, to the west of Bentley Mill Lane and is probably unaffected by the new proposed road. It is marked on Yates map of 1775, and for part of the eighteenth century was a blade mill. It is shown on an OS edition of 1834 when operating as a corn mill under Henry Eld. By 1850 Wright and Underhill were millers. It is marked on the 1885 OS 6" map and the 1886 OS 1:2500 map (Fig. 5) as Bentley Flour Mill, as a complex of buildings with probably a mill house, mill and pig styes. It had a dried up mill pond and indications of tail race or culvert. It was disused by 1903 (Fig. 6) though the buildings are still present on the 1918 OS edition (Fig. 7).

The area as a whole has a broadly industrial character and lies at the edge of the Black Country conurbation. A handful of areas along the route of the proposed new road are non-industrial in character, including some areas of open pasture next to the River Tame. The site of a toll-house associated with the turnpike road to Wednesbury (the modern Darlaston Road) lies next to the River Tame in a small area of pasture (BCSMR 6947). It is probable that recent works to straighten and embank the river in this location have removed the remains of the toll-house. The Globe Inn has been accorded Grade II listed status and is probably to be dated to the early eighteenth century (BCSMR 1555). The inn is one of the oldest structures in the area, and is rendered brick with a tile roof. It is much restored and is also situated on the turnpike road to Wednesbury. Darlaston road is the main thoroughfare for the area.

The development of the area is dominated by the mineral resources of the Black Country, and the infrastructure developed for and influenced by these resources.

The Walsall canal runs through the area and forms part of the Birmingham Canal Navigations. The southern end of the Walsall canal from its junction with the Wednesbury Old Canal to Broadwater Fire Engine was constructed by the Birmingham and Fazeley canal promoters in 1786. The canal was cut through the area in 1799 and is the main line of the Walsall Canal (BCSMR 5870). The new road line transects the canal to the east of James Bridge Aqueduct (BCSMR 2694). The canal itself is essentially a contour canal that follows the topography of the area at the Walsall Level, in order to cut down on the number of locks needed and to make its use easier. It is embanked over the Tame Valley, and James Bridge Aqueduct for the same reason. The James Bridge Aqueduct carries the Walsall Canal over Bentley Mill Lane and formerly over the River Tame. It was constructed in 1797, and is built of brick with sandstone keystones. It has two round arches with abutments curved on plan. The south side was partly rebuilt in nineteenth century brick.

The Anson Canal, to the north of the Walsall Canal, was cut through in 1830, and is also transected by the east-west link of the new road. The Bentley Canal was cut through in 1843, and is not affected by the new road scheme.

The Grand Junction Railway was cut through in 1837, and thus the infrastructure for the industrial development of Darlaston was in place.

The Tithe Map of Darlaston depicts the railway and the canals cutting through still relatively undeveloped countryside, though the basins that would later serve the Crescent Iron Works and Darlaston Green Furnaces (to the south and south-west of the proposed new road, are visible. Part of the route to the east of the River Tame and Bentley Mill Lane is within the parish of Bloxwich and is not mapped.

The competition for the transporting of goods between the canals and the railways meant that connections between the two were essential for the railways to gain a substantial share of the heavy iron trade (Foxton 1998, 2).

Darlaston Basin, opened by the LNWR in 1845 enjoyed five years as the only Railway Interchange to serve the BCN outside the immediate Birmingham area (Foxton 1997, 4). On the 18th August 1845, the GJR entered into an agreement with the Birmingham Coal Company, who had a basin on the Walsall Level of the BCN at Bughole Bridge, Darlaston.

The increase in trade and industry led to an increase in population. To the west of Bentley Mill Lane is the James Bridge cemetery (BCSMR 8918) though this is unlikely to be affected by the proposed route. This is depicted on the Ordnance Survey Edition of 1886.

Located to the south of Darlaston Road are post-medieval gasometers, which are currently operational and not visible on maps until 1974.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Above Ground Archaeology

Along the proposed new route are two buildings, which are of national significance, the James Bridge Aqueduct (Plates 1 and 2) and the Globe Inn (Plates 3 and 4), both are listed Grade II. The James Bridge Aqueduct is relatively unaltered and is a good example of a small canal aqueduct situated on a distinctive stretch of embanked canal within one of the more historically resonant landscapes in the area (Conway, 2002). The Globe Inn is the only pre-nineteenth century non-industrial building in a predominantly nineteenth and twentieth century industrial landscape. The inn is situated on an ancient routeway between Darlaston and Wednesbury and is significant as it is one of the only remnants of the pre-industrial past within the area. Neither of these structures is directly affected by the development, though it should be ensured that works in the vicinity of these structures

do not adversely affect them through vibrations or undermining the foundations etc. If these buildings were to be demolished or altered then there should be clear justification for this and a full archaeological record be made in advance of this process (ibid.).

The north-south road from Darlaston Road will transect the embankment of the Walsall Canal to the east of James Bridge Aqueduct (Plates 5 and 6). The east-west link of the road will transect the embankment of the Anson Canal (Plates 7 and 8).

Below Ground Archaeology

It is likely that remains associated with the Toll House (BCSMR 6947) have been removed during recent works to straighten and embank the river in this location.

The north-south line of the road, to the east of the River Tame and Bentley Mill Lane (and west of the Globe Inn) will cut through land at the edge of the James Bridge Colliery. Shafts are depicted on the Ordnance Survey Edition of 1886, and while these have value as a part of a wider industrial landscape, as individual sites are of little archaeological interest and no further archaeological work is recommended. The area is currently open scrub land to the south of the Walsall Canal (Plates 5 and 9) and overgrown scrub with an area of fenced off hardcore to the north (Plate 10).

To the north of the new road, there is the Bentley Mill, though this is on the opposite side of the road and is unlikely to be affected by the new route. As the proposed route is to the east and south of the River Tame, it is unlikely that below ground archaeological remains relating to Bentley Mill will be affected.

Between Bentley Mill Lane and the Anson Canal, the east-west link of the proposed road cuts through open scrub (Plates 11 and 12). It is unlikely that archaeological remains of any date are present.

To the west of the Anson Canal the new route follows the line of the culverted river. The 1886 Ordnance Survey Edition depicts a building in this area, though the building is not present on either the earlier title map, or the Ordnance Survey Edition of 1903. This area was developed as a sewage farm, and it is unlikely that archaeological deposits exist within this area.

In essence, the development of the area is largely industrial, and historically dominated by its infrastructure, namely the construction of the Walsall Canal, with subsequent railway and interchange. Now abandoned and overgrown the area will likely benefit from renewed development, again concentrating on the infrastructure of the area.

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c.1840 Darlaston Tithe Map

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