

**FORMER ERCOL FACTORY SITE,
CONEGRA FIELDS, LONDON ROAD,
HIGH WYCOMBE.**

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

National Grid Reference: **SU 88130 92647**

By: AOC ARCHAEOLOGY GROUP

Client: BELLWAY HOMES

OCTOBER 2006

National Grid Reference: SU 88130 92647

Site Code: EHW 02

On behalf of: Bellway Homes North London Division
Bellway House
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Timing: Watching Brief Fieldwork
9th December 2005 to 4th October 2006

Post-excavation and report production
October 2006

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1 ABSTRACT

Between the 9th December 2005 and 4th October 2006 an intermittent archaeological watching brief, on behalf of Bellway Homes, was undertaken to observe a programme of intrusive groundworks at the former Ercol factory site at Conegra Fields, London Road, High Wycombe. The groundworks consisted of trenching to assist in the construction of new residential units. Observations revealed that the ground sequence was limited to compact natural chalk, occasionally sealed by deposits of modern made ground. The Watching Brief was required by the Local Planning Authority after previous archaeological work on the site identified features of unknown date at the east end of the site.

The results of this Watching Brief support the findings of the previous phases of archaeological investigation, indicating that large parts of the site had been terraced or truncated. No archaeological deposits were observed during the course of the ground works.

2 INTRODUCTION

Site Location

- 2.1 The site is located in the Wycombe District of Buckinghamshire, on the eastern edge of High Wycombe. The site is bounded by the railway line to the south, Healey Avenue to the west and by residential housing to the north and east. (Figures 1 & 2). The site is centred on National Grid Reference (NGR) SU 88130 92647, and covers an approximate area of 4.3 hectares.

Development Proposals

- 2.2 The development plan, for which planning permission has been granted (Planning Ref. No. 00/6742), is for the construction of a large residential development on a large brown field site, consisting of 265 new residential units.

Previous Archaeological Investigations

- 2.3 At the end of 2002 an archaeological evaluation (AOC 2003) was undertaken on site to assess the potential for archaeological remains to survive within the proposed development area. This took the form of 37 machine excavated test pits, which were distributed across the full area of the development. In association with this previous phase of archaeological investigation, a watching brief was undertaken to observe the initial phase of ground works on site.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Geology and Topography

- 3.1 The British Geological Survey map (BGS Sheet 255) shows the site is located on chalk with flints (Upper Chalk) which is capped to the north by clay with flints. Alluvium lies to the south of the site, adjacent to the River Rye.
- 3.2 The development site is located on a chalk ridge overlooking The River Wye approximately 500m to the south. The surrounding ground rises steeply to the north, although the gradient present on site is much gentler. The ground level on site is highly variable, ranging from c. 82m to c. 106m AOD.

Archaeological and Historical Background

- 3.3 The archaeological and historical background, and the results of previous archaeological investigations, have been extracted from a Desk Based Assessment (AOC 2003) and are summarised below:

Prehistoric (before c. AD 43)

- 3.4 This area on the Chiltern escarpment would have been ideal for settlement during the prehistoric period, with light well drained soils and open woodland allowing relatively easy clearance of trees and good cultivable ground. There is also a line of springs which would have provided a reliable source of water. There is fairly substantial evidence for prehistoric activity in the area, with a number of worked flints including an Acheulian hand axe through to Bronze Age tools and Iron Age picks and coins. A flint mine antler pick, found at the beginning of the 20th century during the construction for the railway, was initially interpreted as representing a flint mine. However, nothing else indicative of this has been discovered and as flint mines are generally found on level ground as opposed to the steeply sloping terrain of the site area, this conclusion must be perceived as unlikely.

Roman (c. AD 43 - 450)

- 3.5 There is a significant amount of evidence for Roman activity in the area, particularly relating to the Roman road that passes through High Wycombe accompanied by the Roman villa and baths found here. The villa was probably built between AD 150-170 and was occupied until the 4th century. No functional farm structures have been found such as drying rooms or threshing floors, so it has been speculated that the house was surrounded by orchards or gardens. It was thought that there were two 'hill top camps' at Keep Hill and Castle Hill, but the evidence has since been questioned, with the "entrenchments" at Keep Hill being probably just a hollow way with a ditch cutting across the contours.

Anglo-Saxon (c. 450-1066)

- 3.6 No evidence has been recovered from this period.

Medieval (c. 1066 - 1485)

- 3.7 High Wycombe is recorded in the Domesday Survey as being set within a rural landscape of woodland and fields. In the 11th century, Wycombe is referred to as *Wicumbe*, but has been known alternatively as Chepping Wycombe since the 14th century to the present day. It did not have borough status in 1086 but it is referred to as one during the reign of Henry I (AD 1100-1135).
- 3.8 The lynchet terracing system provides evidence of agriculture on the slopes of North London Road. The town was also prospering with the presence of six watermills, dealing in corn and paper, located along the River Rye. The hospital of St. John Baptist was situated on the old London to Oxford Road (Easton Street). It was built in the second half of the 12th century, and acted as an infirmary hall and chapel, therefore meeting both medical and spiritual needs. The remains are now Grade II Listed. Although High Wycombe itself was developing well during the medieval period, the only evidence pertaining to the proposed development site is the lynchet system. However, the majority, if not all of this, would have been destroyed with the construction of the Ercol factories.

Post-Medieval (c. 1485 - modern)

- 3.9 In the early 16th century, lace making and paper making became primary industries in High Wycombe, and the town became renowned as “the best and wealthiest town in Buckinghamshire”, no doubt encouraged by the Oxford to London road passing through here. The earliest cartographic evidence for this area is the 1596 All Souls map, which shows a compact settlement surrounded by woodland, meadows and fields.
- 3.10 The proximity of the Chiltern beech woodlands to High Wycombe meant that by the 1790’s, the chair-making industry had become well established. The impact of this is reflected through the population survey, which shows an increase between 1704 and 1801 in the number of families from 300 to 4,242. In 1854, the first railway line to reach Wycombe was opened, which can be seen about 300m southwest of the site on the first available OS map of 1875. At this time, the site was situated c.350m north of the main road, in the midst of fields, with Hatter’s Lane running to the east of the site, up to Totteridge in the north. The same road marks the eastern boundary of the site today. Although the Ercol site is still undeveloped at this time, the 19th century saw the prosperity of High Wycombe escalate significantly. This would have been at least partially due to the arrival of the railway, combined with the town’s role as a market for the corn growing region which supplied both corn and flour to London.

3.11 By 1898, the OS map shows the beginnings of development nearer the site, with housing having been constructed along the northern side of the newly widened road. The population had also continued to escalate, with the number of families reaching 19 282 in 1901. The impact can be seen on the 1925 and 1926 OS maps, which show a significant increase in the density of housing to the east of High Wycombe. They also show the site to have been built on for the first time, with the present boundaries already established. It contains a rope works in the eastern part, and furniture industries and a timber yard to the west, lining the GWN railway line. Fields still exist to the north. South of the railway line are orchards and various housing developments at Wycombe Marsh. Between 1945 and 1958, a further 2,700 houses were built as well as an industrial estate at Cresses and Sands. The ring road of Abbey Way was constructed in the 1960's. The M40 reached High Wycombe in 1968. The impact of this was drastic, as shown by the 1968 OS map, with the whole area built on. The housing estate north of the site today was a part of this, apart from a small area of wasteland above Quebec Road. The furniture factory has taken over the whole of the site, with buildings now covering the whole site area. A crane is also marked near the centre. South of the railway, a similar industrial sector has grown, also comprising furniture factories, reflecting the success of the earlier chair-making industry in the 18th century. The Ercol factory site remains the same from then to the present day.

Results of Previous Archaeological Investigations

- 3.12 A total of 37 test pits were excavated across the site to ascertain the level of truncation and terracing and to define any areas with potential. In addition to this, a watching brief was carried out during the removal of the concrete slab across site. Of greatest significance were the features recorded at the eastern end of the site. Test Pits 1 to 5 did not appear to have been affected by terracing, although the level of horizontal truncation caused by the construction of the car park was not clear. However the survival of features in Test Pit 3 suggested that the potential for preservation of cut archaeological features at this end of the site was good. Despite 100% excavation, the features remained undated. The fact that the fills were the same suggested that they were contemporary in date. The other feature recorded in the eastern part of the site in Test Pit 6 was probably the result of terracing, although this feature also remained undated. This eastern tip of the site also had relatively little truncation, and this was proved by the presence of plough scars in Test Pit 7. Test Pits 6 to 9 were all located on this higher part of the site and did not appear to have been terraced.
- 3.13 To the immediate west of the Test Pits 6 to 9, the ground level dropped sharply into a part of the site where factory buildings had previously stood. Here there had clearly been substantial terracing. There was, however, a strip that appeared to be original ground, as recorded in Test Pits 11 and 12. The deep feature, probably the result of terracing in Test Pit 11, had clearly survived the construction of the Ercol Factory.

- 3.14 The western half of the area, which lay beyond the public footpath that bisected the site, had also suffered significant terracing in parts. In general the northern half of this area had been terraced away and the southern edge of the site had suffered less truncation. This was demonstrated by the presence of plough scars in a number of test pits along the southern edge. These plough scars may actually have been planting beds as they appeared wider and less even in some of the pits but it is likely that they were features related to cultivation.
- 3.15 The final part of the site was the car park in the extreme northwestern corner of the site. The six Test Pits excavated here revealed the make up layers of the carpark laid directly onto the natural chalk. It is not clear exactly how much truncation had taken place as a result of the car park construction but the fact that this car park was on a steep slope indicated that it had not been terraced.
- 3.16 In conjunction with the test pitting, a watching brief was undertaken to observe the deposits exposed by the lifting of pre-existing concrete slabs. The watching brief confirmed the findings of the test pits and proved that large parts of the site had been terraced or truncated.

4 AIMS OF THE INVESTIGATION

- 4.1 The general aims of the watching brief were:
- To record archaeological deposits and features exposed during ground works.
 - To mitigate by record the impact of development on surviving archaeological deposits.
 - To determine the extent of previous truncations of the archaeological deposits.
 - To enable the Senior Archaeologist at Buckingham County Council to make an informed decision on the status of the condition imposed on planning consent.
- 4.2 To make available to interested parties the results of the investigation in order to inform the mitigation strategy as part of the planning process.

5 METHODOLOGY

- 5.1 A *Written Scheme of Investigation* was prepared (AOC 2004) detailing the methodologies utilized during the course of the archaeological investigations.
- 5.2 The fieldwork was managed by Ron Humphrey for AOC Archaeology and supervised by the author. The site was monitored by the David Radford for Buckinghamshire County Council.

- 5.3 A site code **EHW02** was created as the unique site identity.
- 5.4 All of the work was carried out in line with Archaeological Guidance Paper (AGP): 3, Standards and Practices in Archaeological Fieldwork (English Heritage June 1998); and IFA Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs (IFA October 1994).

6 RESULTS

- 6.1 During this current phase of watching brief activity intrusive groundworks in two areas, Area 1 and Area 2, were observed (Figure 2).
- 6.2 In Area 1 a single trench was excavated and monitored. The trench was 30m long, 1.00m wide and 1.60m deep. From ground level, a 0.45m thick layer of made-ground was observed. Beneath this was a 1.15m thick layer of natural grey-white compact chalk. No archaeological remains were observed.
- 6.3 In Area 2 a series of foundation trenches were excavated in an area measuring 22m by 10m, with ground level at approximately 87m OD. The foundation trenches averaged 1m wide and 2.3m in depth. In section a single deposit was observed, consisting of natural greyish white compact chalk recorded throughout the trenching. No archaeological or geological features were observed.

7 FINDS

- 7.1 No finds were recovered during the course of the watching brief.

8 CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 No archaeological features were revealed during the course of the watching brief, and no finds were recovered from the site.
- 8.2 The results of this watching brief are therefore unable to inform any more accurately on the date or function of the features recorded in the earlier stages of work. Possibly the areas where the watching brief was conducted were simply outside the area of potential archaeological activity. However, given the extent of truncation to the east, it seems more probable that the Ercol factory site had a more widespread impact on the underlying deposits than expected.
- 8.3 Consequently, no further archaeological work is recommended for this site. The results of the Watching Brief will be made public via the ADS OASIS (Appendix A) project and a copy of this report will be made available to the local studies library. No further analysis or reporting is considered necessary.

9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

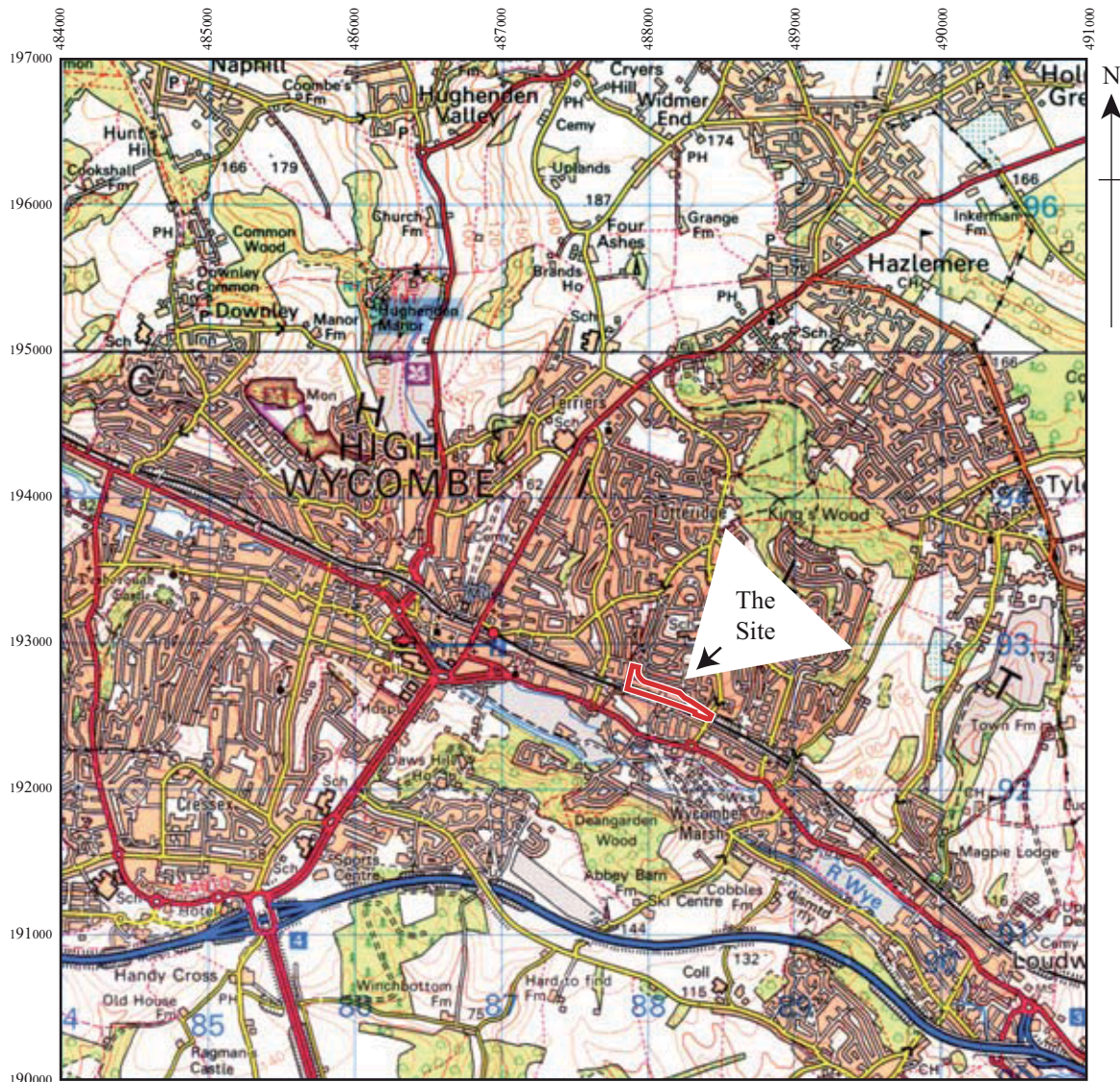
AOC Archaeology Group Ltd 2003. Former Ercol Factory Site, Buckinghamshire – An Archaeological Assessment.

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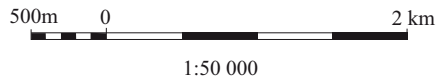


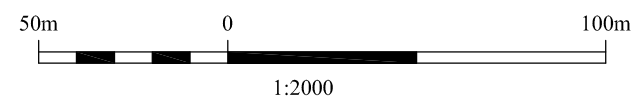
Figure 1: Site Location



Based on the Plan by A.P.R. Services

- Site Outline
- ▨ Watching Brief Area

Figure 2: Detailed Site / Watching Brief Area Location



APPENDIX A OASIS FORM

OASIS ID: aocarcha1-11926

Project details

Project name Ercol Factory Site

Short description of the project Between the 9th December 2005 and 4th October 2006 an intermittent archaeological watching brief, on behalf of Bellway Homes, was undertaken to observe a programme of intrusive groundworks. The groundworks consisted of a series of trenching to assist in the construction of new residential units. Observations revealed that the ground sequence was limited to compact natural chalk, occasionally sealed by deposits of modern made ground. No archaeological deposits were observed during the course of the ground works.

Project dates Start: 09-12-2005 End: 04-10-2006

Previous/future work Yes / No

Any associated project reference codes EHW 02 - Sitecode

Any associated project reference codes 6937 - Contracting Unit No.

Type of project Recording project

Site status None

Current Land use Vacant Land 1 - Vacant land previously developed

Investigation type 'Watching Brief'

Prompt Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16

Project location

Country England

Site location BUCKINGHAMSHIRE WYCOMBE HIGH WYCOMBE Former Ercol Factory Site, Conegra Fields, London Road, High Wycombe

Postcode	HP13 7AZ
Study area	4.30 Hectares
Site coordinates	SU 88130 92647 51.6252586432 -0.726708856858 51 37 30 N 000 43 36 W Point
Height OD	Min: 86.95m Max: 87.55m

Project creators

Name of Organisation	AOC Archaeology
Project brief originator	Local Authority Archaeologist and/or Planning Authority/advisory body
Project design originator	AOC Archaeology
Project director/manager	Ron Humphrey
Project supervisor	Chris Clarke
Type of sponsor/funding body	Developer
Name of sponsor/funding body	Bellway Homes

Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Physical Archive recipient	Buckinghamshire County Museum
Physical Archive ID	EHW 02

Digital Archive recipient	Buckinghamshire County Museum
Digital Archive ID	EHW 02
Digital Contents	'none'
Digital Media available	'Images raster / digital photography','Text'
Paper Archive recipient	Buckinghamshire County Museum
Paper Archive ID	EHW 02
Paper Contents	'none'
Paper Media available	'Diary','Plan','Report','Unpublished Text'

Project bibliography 1

Publication type	Grey literature (unpublished document/manuscript)
Title	FORMER ERCOL FACTORY SITE, CONEGRA FIELDS, LONDON ROAD, HIGH WYCOMBE- AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF REPORT
Author(s)/Editor(s)	Clarke, C. and Collie, T.
Other bibliographic details	Grey literature
Date	2006
Issuer or publisher	AOC Archaeology
Place of issue or publication	London
Description	Bound A4 text and illustrations

Entered by Chris Clarke (chrisclarke@aocarchaeology.co.uk)
Entered on 16 October 2006