



# University of Leicester

## Archaeological Services

An archaeological watching  
brief at Friars Mill,  
Bath Lane,  
Leicester  
NGR: SK 58002 04684

John Thomas



**An archaeological watching  
brief at Friars Mill,  
Bath Lane,  
Leicester  
(SK 58002 04684)**

**John Thomas**

*For*

Leicester City Council

**Checked by Project Manager**

**Signed:**



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ULAS Report No.2014-190 ©2014

**Accession Number: A24.2014**

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## **An Archaeological Watching Brief at Friars Mill, Bath Lane, Leicester, (SK 58002 04684)**

John Thomas

### **Summary**

*An archaeological watching brief was carried out at Friars Mill, Bath Lane, Leicester, (NGR SK 58002 04684).*

*The work was carried out during the excavation of foundations for a new lift pit adjacent to a former mill building which lies on the Rover Soar frontage.*

*The area affected by the development was a small square measuring c. 2m x 2m. This was excavated to a depth of c. 1.50m.*

*Much of the area inside the excavation was taken up with a substantial brick wall footing. A layer of black silty clay was exposed into which the wall had been cut, but this contained no archaeological finds.*

*The archive for this project will be deposited with Leicester City Museum Service, under the accession code A.24.2014.*

### **Introduction**

University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) were commissioned by Leicester City Council to carry out an archaeological watching brief during ground-works for a new lift pit at Friars Mill, Bath Lane, Leicester (SK 58002 04684).

This archaeological work was carried out in accordance with NPPF Section 12: Enhancing and Conserving the Historic Environment.

The watching brief was required as a condition of the planning consent for the construction of a new lift pit as part of a wider scheme of development at the site (amended Planning App. No. 20131613).

The development site lies within the north-west corner of the historic core of Roman and medieval Leicester, and is located near to the site of the north gate of the walled town and near to a concentration of high-status Roman buildings revealed through recent excavations. The area has considerable archaeological potential.

### **Location and Geology**

The site is located in Leicester City Centre on the western side of Bath Lane, a plot formerly occupied by Friars Mill, a textile factory which closed by 2005 (SK 58002 04684, Fig. 1).

The site lies on fairly flat ground at a height of approximately 53m OD. The British Geological Survey of England and Wales shows the underlying geology to consist of alluvium – clay, silt, sand and gravel with the bedrock over Branscombe Mudstone Formation (BGS Geology Viewer <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>).

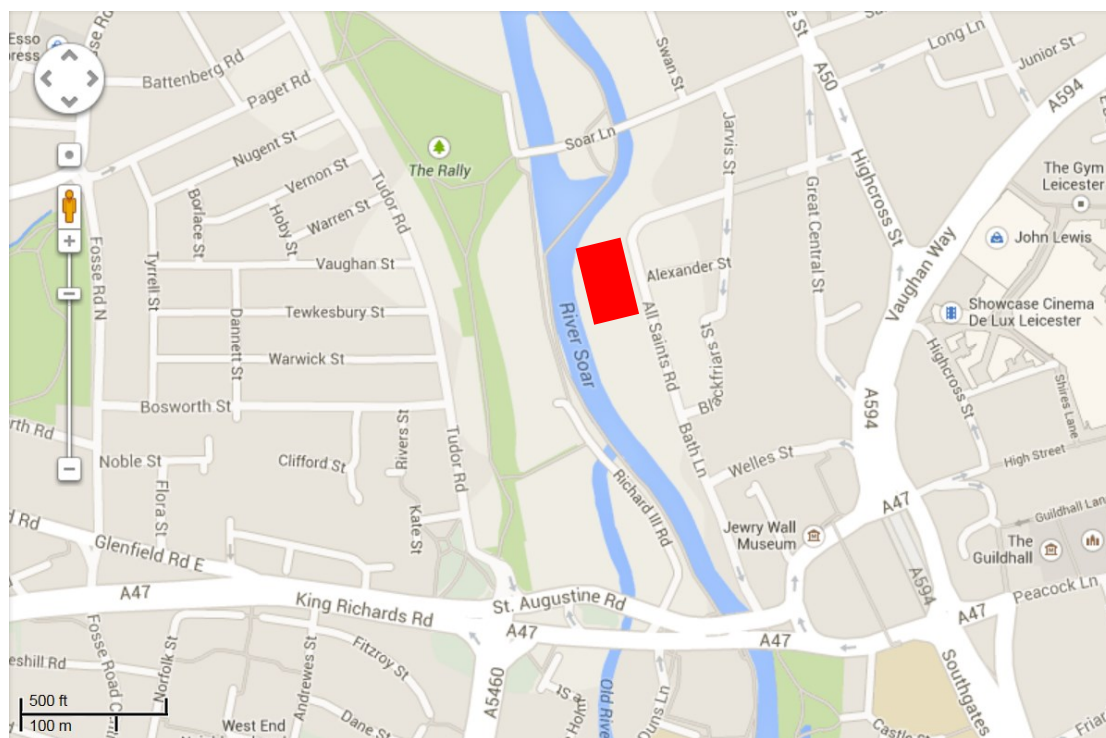


Figure 1 Friars Mill: Approximate Site Location (highlighted)

### **Archaeological and Historical Background** (from Clarke 2013).

The site lies within the north-west quarter of the historic core of the Roman and medieval town of Leicester in an area of extremely high potential for remains of the prehistoric, Roman and medieval periods in particular. The site is occupied by Leicester's earliest surviving purpose-built factory, of significant interest as an important survival on a site with early associations with a highly significant phase in the development of Leicester's textile industry.

#### ***The Iron Age***

At Leicester the development of the Roman and medieval town has meant that evidence of the Iron Age settlement has been severely truncated. A possible circular house was found at St Nicholas Circle and pits and a burial was present at Blackfriars Street. Evidence of the extent of the settlement has depended on the distribution of Later Iron Age artefacts. These include pre-Roman imported pottery from Gaul, Italy and Spain represented by Arretine ware, Gallo-Belgic butt beakers and Terra Rubra/Terra Nigra ware. At Blackfriars Street fragments of flan trays may be evidence of coin manufacture, and further fragments have been discovered on recent sites on both sides of Bath Lane. The distribution of Iron Age finds from Leicester, however, does suggest a large lowland settlement covering *c.*8ha and the type of material would suggest a high status settlement with extensive trading links by the time of the Roman conquest. It was this settlement which was to become the Civitas Capital during the Roman occupation. It is worth noting that Roman military artefacts have been found within the area immediately to the south of the Blackfriars study area, including fragments of horse harnesses and the cheek piece of a Roman cavalry

helmet. Such remains may indicate a military presence in the Blackfriars area at the time of the Roman conquest.

### ***The Roman Period***

After the Roman conquest, there is limited evidence to suggest that a small fortlet was established to control the crossing point of the river near the present West Bridge. Evidence for timber buildings of the pre-Flavian period has been encountered, with the suggestion, on the basis of uniformity of alignment, that they have more in common with buildings within a fort than with a native settlement or vicus. Timber buildings later in the first century are on a different alignment, and are considered to represent the first Roman town, expanding to the east from the river, with the presence of wall plaster and *opus signinum* suggesting the gradual adoption of Roman tastes.

In the early 2nd century, a formalised street plan began to be adopted, and the town became the *civitas* capital of the region; *Ratae Corieltavorum*. The town was divided up into rectangular blocks, known as *insulae*. Rapid expansion and increased prosperity of the town and its inhabitants is indicated for this period. By the latter part of the 2nd century a major scheme of public and private building occurred. The Forum and Basilica, the Jewry Wall baths, least one temple site and a variety of domestic, commercial and industrial premises were erected, together with large public buildings of uncertain function on either side of Bath Lane, to the south of the application area. Town Houses of apparent high status have been recorded over much of the northern half of the walled area, the evidence including stone walls; mud brick walls; tessellated pavements; mosaics; bath houses; hypocausts; and painted wall plaster. In the late second or early third century, the town was defended with a rampart and ditch, with a wall perhaps being added later in the third century). A stretch of the western defences, to the south of the application area has been recently excavated on two sites to the south of the application area at Westbridge Wharf and Merlin Works on Bath Lane. The exact line of the western defences has not been confirmed where it passes through the Blackfriars area, although the line of the northern stretch can be projected with confidence.

There is some evidence for suburban occupation outside the walls to the north comprising both timber and, possibly, substantial masonry buildings, together with cemeteries.

The proposed building behind the cottages on the Bath Lane frontage crosses the projected line of the Roman town wall and rampart. The area between the town wall and the river Soar is considered to be of lower potential, but could contain evidence for the town ditch or ditches, earlier courses of the river Soar and burials.

### ***Post-Roman and Medieval Period***

Excavations some 250m to the south of the town, adjacent to the Roman road to *Tripontium* (Caves Inn) revealed the truncated remains of two sunken-featured buildings associated with finds of the fifth-sixth centuries. These represent the first Anglo-Saxon structures to be located in or near the Roman town, but may indicate no more than a small suburban settlement. Within the walls structures of this period with associated pottery and other finds have now been identified at Freeschool Lane and Vaughan Way, whilst other sites in the north-east quarter of the walled area have also

produced early Anglo-Saxon Finds and, in some cases, possible structural features. The density of the Saxon finds recovered from excavations in the north-east quarter suggests extensive Anglo-Saxon domestic occupation during the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries within this area of the walls.

There is little archaeological evidence so far, for late Saxon occupation, and only the church of St. Nicholas, in the Jewry Wall area, has fabric of this period. The medieval 'High Street' (later renamed Highcross and Southgate Streets) was probably the main focus of settlement at this time. Recent excavations at Freeschool Lane have now revealed evidence for late Anglo-Saxon timber buildings and associated finds on the medieval High Street frontage.

The Dominican Friary of the Blackfriars was established in the north-west corner of the town and, first mentioned in 1284, by the 14th century had more than 30 friars. Although the rough location of the precinct is known, the location of the monastic buildings is not. Somewhere in this same area was the church of St Clement, which later evolved into the Friary Church of the Dominicans. Recent excavations at the Merlin Works site to the south of the study area revealed the southern precinct wall of the friary. Given that the projected line of the town wall runs through the eastern side of the study area, evidence for the friary is perhaps unlikely, although there is potential for openings in the town wall allowing access to the river by the friars.

### ***Post medieval***

The principal mill building which fronts onto the River Soar is thought to have been constructed between 1794 and 1820. The Leicester map of 1828 records the site as 'Stubbing Mill', stubbing being a part of the process of milling raw wool. By 1887, the site is recorded as Friars Mills and incorporates the Pump House and Bath Lane Cottages. By the late 19th century the site was owned by Donisthorpes and Co., later described as 'suppliers of Hand Knitting Wools and Cotton Yarns to Central Europe and Scandinavia for over 100 years' in a trade advertisement of 1938.

### ***Previous Archaeological work***

Two previous phases of archaeological work have taken place on the site. In 2003 a trial trench evaluation by Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit (BUFAU) on the southern side of the site revealed possible evidence for the defensive town wall of Leicester (Jones 2003). Earlier in 2014 a second evaluation by ULAS, in relation to the current development, revealed a series of deeply stratified layers overlying possible alluvial deposits in association with Roman and medieval pottery and tile (Thomas 2014). A desk-based assessment of the site was also undertaken by ULAS, highlighting its potential for the survival of archaeological remains (Clarke 2013).

### **Archaeological Objectives**

The main objective of the archaeological excavation is to determine and understand the nature, function and character of any significant archaeology on the site in its cultural and environmental setting.

The aims of the Watching brief were:

- To identify the presence/absence of any archaeological deposits.
- To establish the character, extent and date range for any archaeological deposits to be affected by the proposed ground-works.
- To record any archaeological deposits to be affected by the ground-works.
- To produce an archive and report of any results.

### **Methodology**

All work followed the Institute for Archaeologists (IfA) *Code of Conduct* (2010) and adhered to their *Standards and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* (2008).

*A Design Specification for Archaeological Work* (ULAS 2014) was produced by ULAS prior to the archaeological work being undertaken.

The project involved the supervision of overburden removal at the location of the lift pit by an experienced professional archaeologist during the works.

The lift pit comprised a 2m x 2m square area that was excavated to a depth of 1.5m.

The soils were removed by a JCB mechanical excavator fitted with a toothless ditching bucket.

### **Results**

The site was visited on Thursday 9th October 2014. Excavations for the lift pit were undertaken by a JCB mechanical digger using a toothless ditching bucket and the work was monitored by an experienced archaeologist (Figure 2).

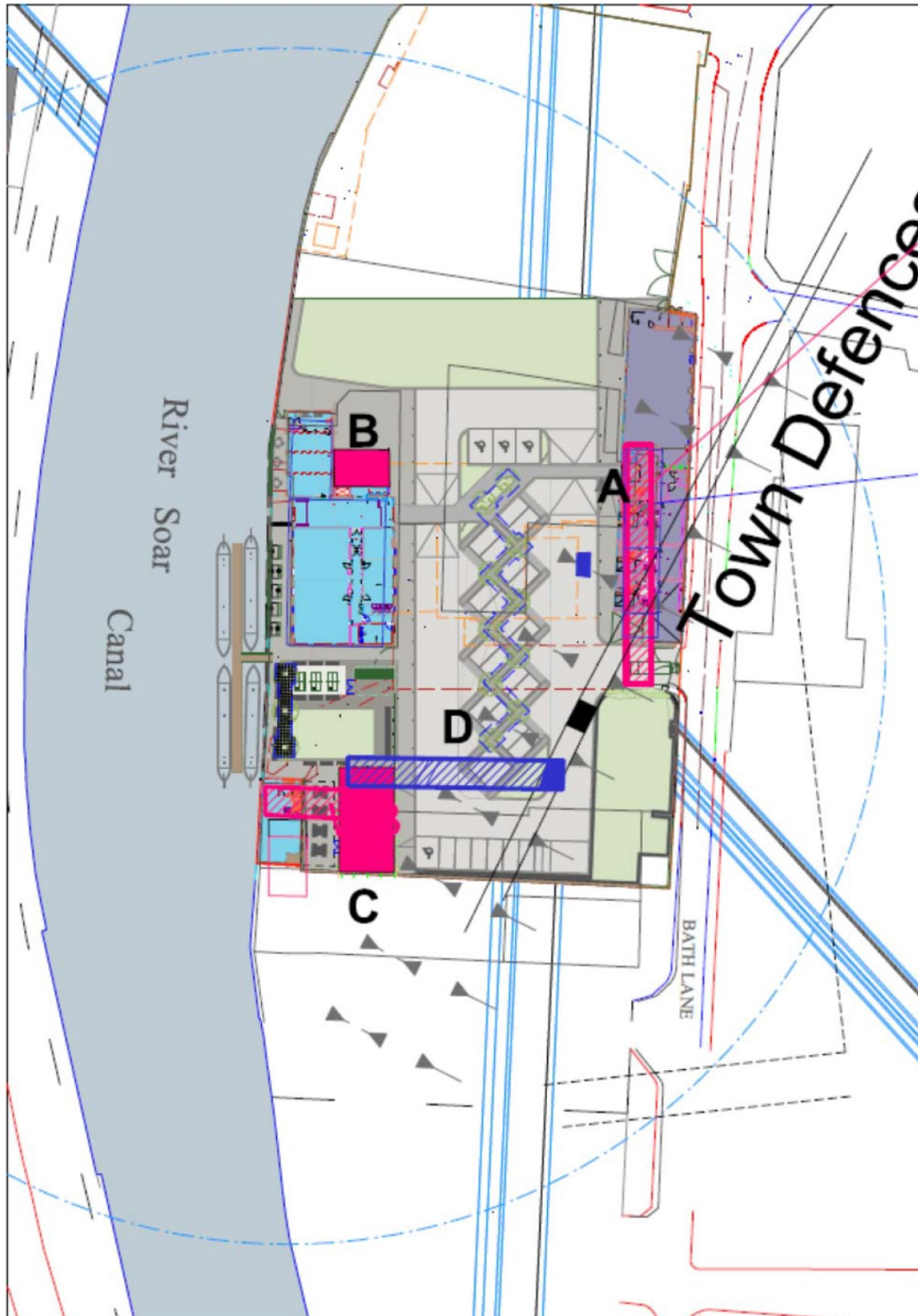
Approximately two thirds (*c.*1.50m) of the excavation contained solid brick wall foundations up to 0.80m thick. These foundations were not removed at the time of the watching brief.

Adjacent to the wall was a thick layer of sticky black silty clay (Figure 3). This was at least 1.10m thick but the base of the layer was not revealed. No artefacts were associated with the layer.

Above the layer and the wall footings was a *c.*0.40m thick layer of demolition rubble.

The watching brief was negative for archaeological finds or features.





**A: trial trench; B: watching brief area; C: trial trench; D: previous investigation**

Figure 2: Plan of proposed new development showing the area covered by the Watching Brief



Figure 3: The watching brief area showing brick wall foundations and black silty layer.

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### **Acknowledgements**

ULAS would like to thank Leicester City Council, Phil Storer of Faithfull and Gould and Adam Hickey of William Anelay Ltd. for their help and co-operation with this project.

The watching brief was undertaken by the author and the project manager was Richard Buckley.

### **Archive**

The archive for this project will be deposited with Leicester Museums Service, with accession number A24.2014. The archive consists of the following:

1 unbound copy of this report (ULAS Report No. 2014-190)

1 watching brief recording sheets

1 contact sheet of digital photographs

1 CD digital photographs

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31-10-2014

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