

**Archaeological Investigations
North West of Medbourne, Leicestershire**

NGR SP 790 934 (centred)

Vicki Score
April 2007

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Summary

The Roman town of Medbourne has been known since the 17th century, and there have been a number of fieldwork projects carried out in the area including fieldwalking, geophysical survey and test-pitting. These have shown Medbourne to be a relatively large example of a Roman 'small town' on the line of the Roman 'Gartree Road' running from Leicester to Colchester.

In July 2005 as part of Time Team's 'Big Roman Dig', University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS), helped to supervise and excavate three trenches just north-west of the town, with the help of local volunteers. Trench 01 was located over a test-pit that had previously found two skeletons, and Trench 02 over a test-pit that had produced Anglo-Saxon pottery. The aim was to look for evidence that the site had continued after the end of the Roman period. A third trench was located in an area thought to be a possible early Christian cemetery from place name and map evidence.

A 4th century cemetery overlying earlier features was located to the north (Trench 01) and three skeletons were removed for further study. To the south the earlier Roman deposits were overlain by numerous features on a different alignment containing Saxon pottery. These included a number of pits and a probable driveway and appear to date to the early – middle Saxon period. The third trench to the east produced a cobbled surface and two badly-preserved skeletons, one of which was buried with a tanged knife, thought to be Saxon in date. The site therefore appears to have continuous occupation from the later 1st century through to the 4th century and into the Saxon period. The grave to the east may well have been part of a Saxon cemetery perhaps associated with the features from Trench 02.

The archive will be deposited with Leicestershire Museums under the accession number XA140.2005.

1. Introduction

The village of Medbourne lies in the Welland valley west of Nevill Holt Hill in south-east Leicestershire (Fig. 1). During the summer of 2005 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken as part of Channel Four's *Time Team: Big Roman Dig*. A project design was produced (Liddle 2005), and a suitable site chosen to be investigated by trial trenching. The investigations were carried out over two weeks in July 2005 using members of the Leicestershire Museums Archaeological Fieldwork Group, museum staff from Leicestershire County Council and local volunteers under the

direction of Dr Jeremy Taylor (University of Leicester) and supervised by staff from University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS).

Previous work on the site to the north-west of the village suggested the presence of late Roman and Saxon features. The archaeological evaluations aimed to look at specific features within the site recorded during previous geophysical survey and test-pit excavation by LAU and University of Leicester in order to provide information on the form and character of the Roman 'small town' to the north west of Medbourne as well as investigate the site's potential Iron Age origins and Anglo-Saxon remains.

2. Geology and Topography

The site lies *c.* 850 m to the north west of Medbourne on higher ground straddling the Slawston Road (Fig. 1). It is *c.* 50ha in area and lies at *c.* 90 m OD on a south facing slope, 1km north of the River Welland and is currently high quality pasture land.

The geology of the investigation area comprises mainly river terrace drift deposits overlying Upper Lias clays with slightly acid and loamy clay soils.



Figure 1 Location of the site north-west of Medbourne

3. Archaeological and Historical Background

The presence of a large Roman site at Medbourne has been known since the 17th century. By the end of the 18th century local antiquarian, John Tailby, was recruiting ‘illiterate ploughboys and shepherds’ to collect finds from the area and during the 19th century there were accounts of hundreds of coins, a ‘gallon’ of Roman pottery and several brooches implying that this had been a large and intense area of Roman activity (Liddle 2005)

In the 1970s and 80s a Fieldwork Group member, Miss Edna Linford, made a number of new discoveries, which led on to a major fieldwalking survey on the town and four adjacent parishes co-ordinated by the Leicestershire Museums Service (Liddle 1994).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a series of test-pits were excavated across the hilltop to attempt to locate the edges of the scatter and to begin to characterise activity within the settlement (Pollard 1988). This was followed by a geophysical survey in 2004 by students of the School of Archaeology & Ancient History of the University of Leicester producing encouraging results from a test magnetometry survey (Fig. 2).

From these investigations Medbourne appears to be a relatively large example of a Roman ‘small town’ (possibly 30-60 ha in total), on the line of ‘Gartree Road’ a major Roman road running south-east from Leicester to Godmanchester and ultimately, Colchester with a relatively major route possibly joining the Gartree Road from the north. The settlement appears to lie almost entirely north of this road with only a narrow strip of settlement fronting the road to the south. The geophysical survey suggests a series of enclosures (these clearly predate the extant ridge and furrow) with the possibility of at least one building and some industrial activity. The line of the road is known either side of the town; however, the enclosures do not appear to parallel its projected route and this raises the suggestion that either its projected alignment or the dating of the enclosures themselves may be wrong (Liddle 2005).

The test-pits produced cobbled surfaces, ditches, pits, postholes, some industrial activity and a single stone building (Pollard 1988). Pottery finds suggest Iron–Age occupation with a large settlement developing from at least the mid 1st century AD (Liddle 2005). The settlement appeared to reach its maximum extent in the 2nd – 3rd centuries and shrunk back towards the core during the 4th century although coin finds suggest some activity into the 5th century (Liddle 2005).

There is also evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity within the core of the settlement. Pottery and an antler pottery stamp die were recovered from a wall and an Anglo-Saxon burial, first reported by John Tailby in the early 19th century, were relocated in one of the test-pits (Pollard 1988). There is some evidence for a field chapel in the form of a small furlong called ‘Old Churchyard’ which appears to be out of phase with the surrounding furlongs, and the 1835 Stanley estate map records an isolated churchyard. It seems at least possible that this may be an early Christian site associated with later phases of the Anglo-Saxon settlement site which would in turn suggest a site of high status (Liddle 2005).

Issue No.	Date	Description
01	April 2007	Geophysical survey and location of trenches



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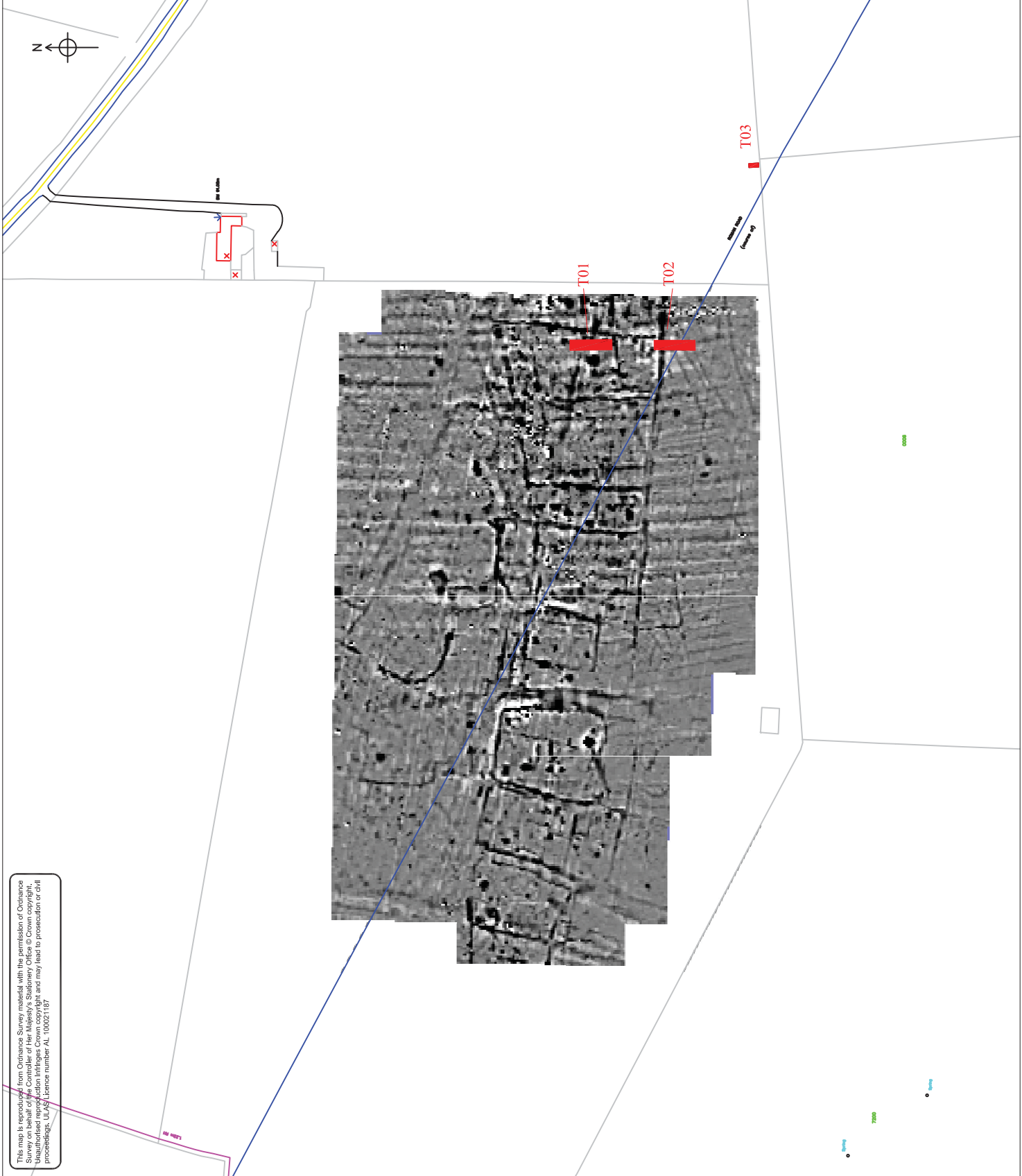


Project Title
Time Team: Medbourne

Subject

Fig. 2 Geophysical survey and location of trial trenches 01-03

Scale	0 50 100 Metres
Paper size	A4
Date	JUNE 07
Drawn by	VS



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4. Aims & Objectives

The excavation and research aims as outlined in the Project Design (Liddle 2005; Appendix IV) are as follows:

- To establish the most detailed possible plan of the core of the Roman ‘small town’ using geophysical survey
- To target trial excavations that will establish information about the beginning and end of the settlement. In particular to address the following questions;
 - What is the nature of Iron Age activity?
 - Is there a detectable military presence
 - How and when was the Roman town laid out?
 - What is the context and nature of the early Anglo-Saxon activity?
- To contribute to the training of community archaeologists in geophysical survey and excavation techniques.
- To give impetus to the wider dissemination and publication of previous work at Medbourne.

5. Methodology

The project team was supervised by Vicki Score, Dave Parker and Gavin Speed (ULAS) with local volunteers. The finds processing was supervised by Nick Cooper and Elizabeth Johnson, and the recording and removal of human remains was supervised by Harriet Jacklin.

Two 20m by 5m trenches were located over geophysical anomalies (Fig. 2). Trench 01 was located over features identified by the geophysical survey and a test-pit that had previously found two skeletons, thought to be late Roman or Anglo-Saxon in date. Trench 02 was positioned again to look at geophysical features but also over a test-pit that had produced Anglo-Saxon pottery.

A third smaller trench (5m by 2m) was located over a possible graveyard to the east (Fig. 2) in an area where workers had reported Anglo-Saxon graves 200 years earlier and where place names suggested a possible cemetery.

Due to the high quality of the pasture both trenches 01 and 02 were de-turfed and stacked by hand by the volunteers. A JCB was then brought in to remove the ploughsoil to the top of archaeological deposits. These were then hand cleaned, sample excavated and recorded according to the project design. Trench 03 was hand dug and cleaned.

Metal detectors were used to scan the soil and the features in all three trenches.

6. Results

The topsoil across site (001) was a rich dark brown approximately 0.4 – 0.5m deep containing large amounts of unstratified Roman, Medieval and occasionally Saxon pottery. Beneath this was a subsoil interface mixed by ploughing. Archaeological deposits lay at approximately 0.5 – 0.6m below the ground.

6.1 Trench 01 (Fig. 3)

Trench 01 very quickly uncovered large numbers of skeletons and other features beneath the topsoil/subsoil which varied between 0.4 – 0.6m deep.

Phase 1 - Roman

The earliest feature in this trench appeared to be a narrow ditch [036], running east - west. This feature was approximately 0.8m wide with steep sides and a flat base. The fill (037) was a dark grey silty clay with charcoal flecks and contained over 200 sherds of Roman pottery dating from the late 1st-early/mid2nd century.

Another narrow gully ([012] (013)) was cut by one of the later graves ([022]). This was just 0.5m at its widest point, shallow (approximately 0.2 – 0.3m deep), with sloping edges and a flat base. The gully was obviously badly truncated and appears to be on the same alignment as a gully to the west [014] (015) and could be the remnants of the same feature. Both gullies contained pottery suggestive of a 2nd century date. Gully [012] also contained late 3rd – 4th century pottery which could well derive from the later grave cutting it as their relationships were quite difficult to see. A small blue glass bead fragment was also recovered from (013).

Another small gully running roughly north-south ([010] (011)) was also seen to be cut by the eastern edge of grave [024] (025). This feature also had a flat base, but with steeper, almost vertical sides. Although narrower than gullies [012] and [014] it could be part of the same group of truncated features and contained late 1st – early 2nd century pottery.

At the southern end of the trench was a layer of soil, very similar to the natural subsoil but slightly darker (041) containing late 2nd – early 3rd century pottery along with earlier wares. The extents were difficult to see as the layer was mixed with other grave cuts and disturbed by ploughing. It's possible that this was a Roman made ground or subsoil layer although the relationships with other features remains uncertain.

The trench was dominated by a large ditch running east-west on a similar alignment as [036]. This was approximately 3m across ([005]; Fig. 3). This was sectioned and excavated down to approximately 1.4m below ground level where excavations stopped for health and safety reasons (Fig. 4).

The northern edge had a very gradual slope; the southern edge was disturbed by skeletons but appears steeper than the opposite sides. The upper fill (006) was a dark brown silty clay. The centre of the upper fill appeared to be mixed with subsoil and may have been disturbed by ploughing. The lower fill (038) was more orange in colour becoming more clayey with depth (Fig. 4). Finds from the ditch include a sherd of Saxon pottery (from the upper levels so possibly residual) and 15 sherds of

Roman pottery dating from the late 1st – early second century but including later 3rd century sherds. However, the pottery was very small and abraded and could easily be residual from earlier contexts. A small ceramic bead and a coin dating *c.* 364-78 was recovered from the upper fill indicating that the ditch had become silted up after this time (Appendix III).

Cut into the northern edge of the excavated section of ditch [005] was a small oval post-hole [007], approximately 0.4m x 0.3m and quite shallow. The fill contained a single sherd of 2nd - 4th century pottery (Fig 3). The southern side of the ditch was cut by a grave (SK9), (Plate x)



Plate 1
Excavated section of ditch [005]
with SK 9 cut into the upper fill.

Phase 2 – Late Roman Cemetery

The second phase was dominated by a late Roman cemetery. Approximately nineteen graves were identified, all oriented east-west, with the heads to the west in the Christian tradition (Plate 2). Nine skeletons were completely uncovered (Fig. 3; SK1 – 9). Where excavated the skeletons appeared quite well-preserved lying face up with their hands crossed over their pelvis. Some may have been wrapped, suggested by their hunched shoulders. Many were also intercutting making it difficult to establish relationships and identify the exact number of graves.

Several of the skeletons were cut into the top of the Roman features. Two graves (SK8; [032], (033) and [050] (051)), were quite clearly cut into the upper fill of the large ditch (Figs 2 & 4). One of the skeletons (SK9; [034] (035)) was cut into the top of ditch [036]. This produced 189 sherds of pottery which included sherds similar to those from ditch [036], and a small green opaque bead (Appendix IV). Graves were also noted cutting into the top of gullies [012], [014], [010]



Plate 2

Trench 01: Left - Uncovered graves oriented east-west
Right – Skeletons 4 – 7 being excavated.

The pottery found with the skeletons is mainly 3rd – 4th century in date, but also includes some earlier material. However, much of the material is small and fragmentary and could well be upcast from the digging of the graves, disturbing Phase 1 activity. A single 1st/2nd century coin was recovered from SK7 – again this may have derived from earlier features. A single sherd of Saxon pottery from the upper layers of one of the graves ([016]) is also thought to be intrusive.

An unexcavated gully in the southern part of the trench ([018] (019)), lay on a similar alignment to the graves and could actually be several intercutting graves. A small post-hole was noted in south-west corner of the trench ([003], (004)). This was less than 0.1m deep and very badly truncated. No dating evidence was recovered from this feature.

The original test-pit was also recorded (009) overlying SK2 and SK3.

Three of the skeletons were lifted for further study (SK1, SK6 and SK9); the other six skeletons that had been excavated were assessed *in situ* (SK2, SK3, SK4, SK5, SK7 and SK8). The skeletons included three males and six females all either young adults (21-35) or Middle Adults (36-50). Two of the females had lower back problems which may have been a consequence of their everyday activities (Appendix III; Plate 3).



Plate 3

A reconstruction of one of the skulls (reproduced from sketches made during the Time Team programme).

Photos by C. Royal.

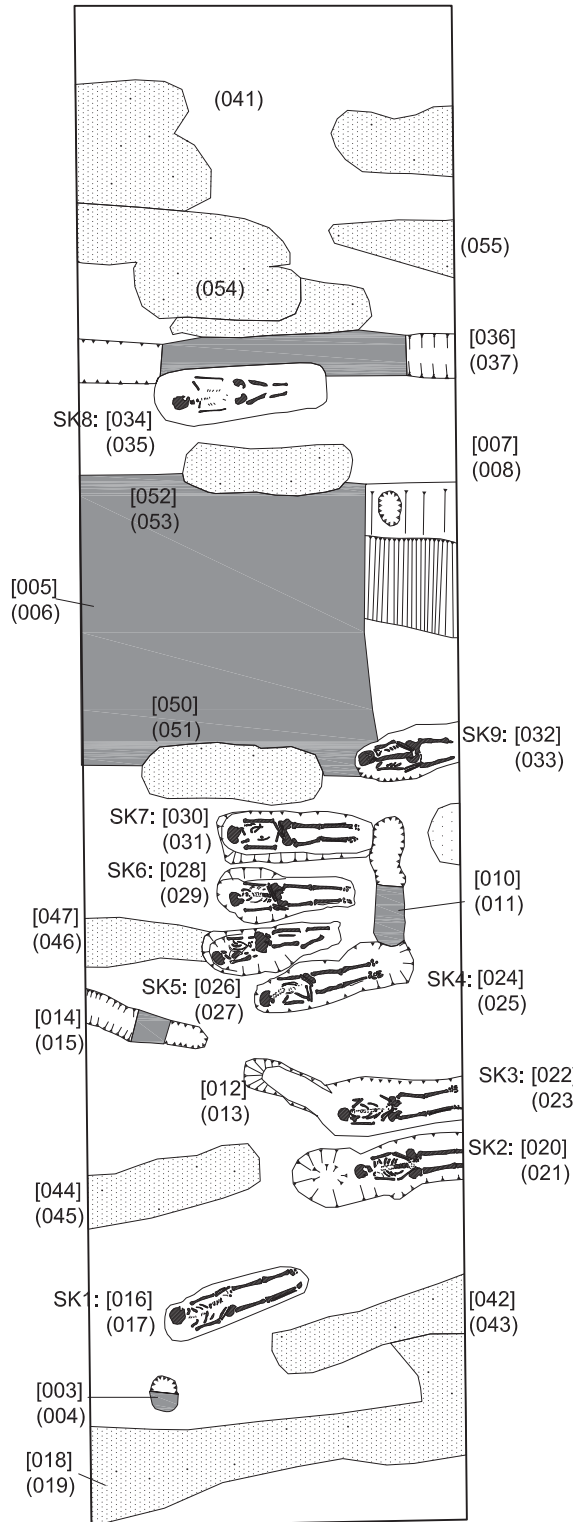


Fig. 3 Plan of Trench 01

0 5 Metres

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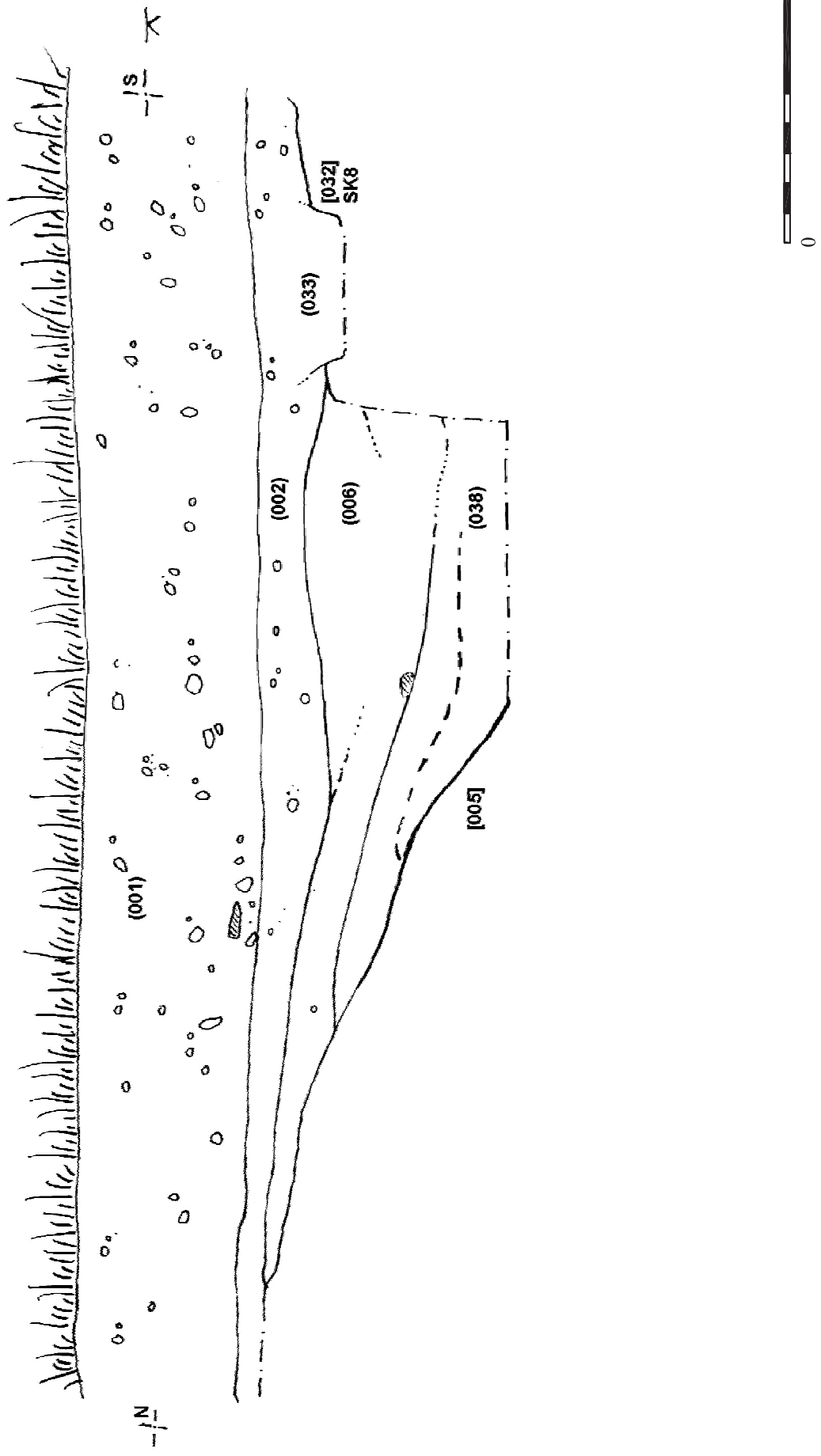


Figure 4 West facing section of [006]

6.2 Trench 02 (Fig. 5, Plate 5)

Phase 1 - Roman

Trench 02 also contained Roman features. The most obvious of these was a large ditch ([248] (249)) running east-west. Although only partially excavated, the sides appeared to be gradual becoming very steep with depth and the fill was yellow-brown silty clay. Only a small area was excavated; this contained just five sherds of late 1st-mid second century pottery. It is on the same alignment as gully [036] in Trench 01 and appears to be contemporary with the earlier Phase 1 features to the north.

Two other isolated features north of the ditch might also be Roman in date. These include post-hole ([201] (200)) which contained no pottery to date the feature and a small pit ([211], (210)) which contained twenty-five sherds of late 2nd – 3rd century pot.

Phase 3 - Saxon

The remainder of the features all appeared to be later in date and are on a different alignment to the Roman features and those in Trench 01 (approximately 45°). Some cut into the top of the Roman ditch. These include a large pit ([256] (250)). This pit contained the largest amount of finds including over 50 sherds of Saxon pottery. It also contained over 200 sherds of Romano-British material dating from late 1st through to the fourth century and two coins, one dating to 364-378 (Appendix IV). The earlier material probably came from ditch [248]; however the amounts of later pottery suggest that there was some activity in this area during the 3rd – 4th centuries that was disturbed by the Saxon features.

Several gullies running north-east – southwest ([235] [257] [233]) also appear to be cutting into the edge of the top of ditch [248]. These are on the same alignment and likely to be the eastern equivalent of the three gullies lying to the west ([240], [242] [244]). All of the gullies are very narrow and quite shallow and contained small amounts of Saxon pottery. A small pit ([246] (247)) may be earlier than at least the middle gully [242] but the relationships were hard to determine. This contained a sherd of late 4th Century pottery.

Another three gullies were visible to the south again on the same north-east – southwest alignment and cut by a later ditch [251] (252). Gullies [227], [229], [231] were all of similar sizes and depths. All of the gullies contained large accumulations of stone within the fills (Plate 4) as well as Saxon pottery and several sherds of 4th century Roman pottery. It is possible that the stony fill could represent earlier demolition rubble infilling the later features, perhaps used as some kind of hardcore surface (Plate 4). These features mirror those seen on the geophysical survey and could represent some kind of track or droveway.

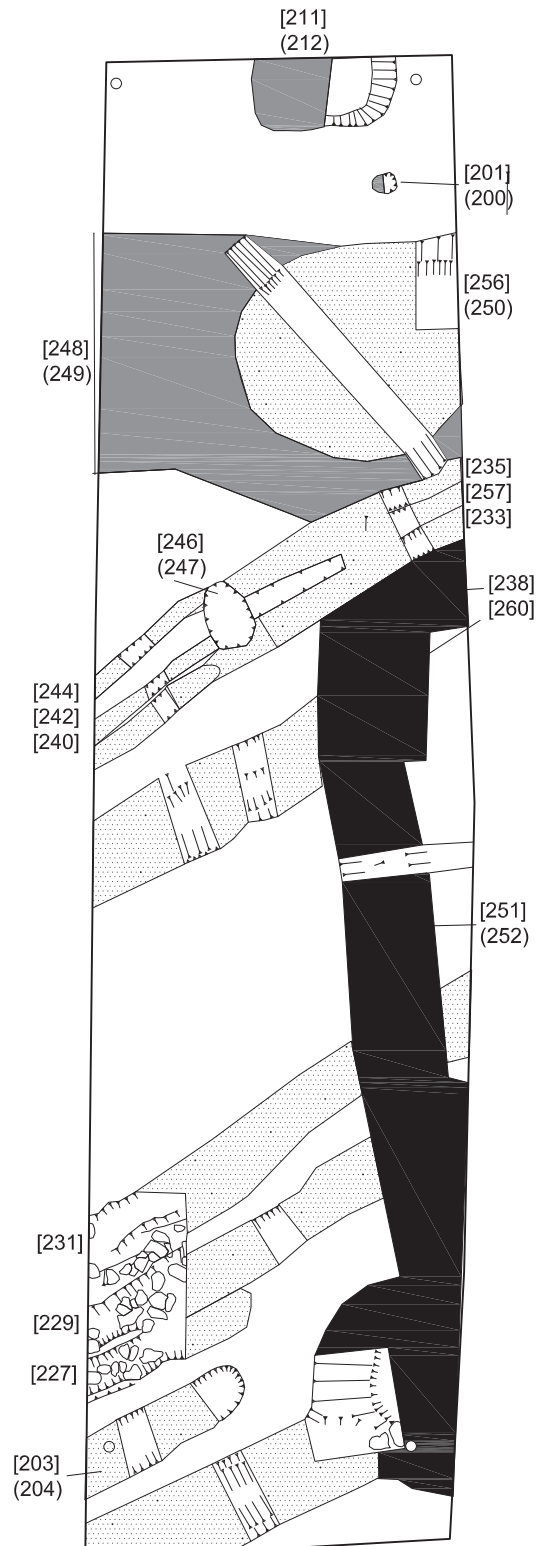
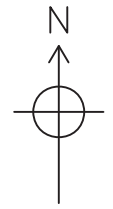


Fig. 5 Plan of Trench 02



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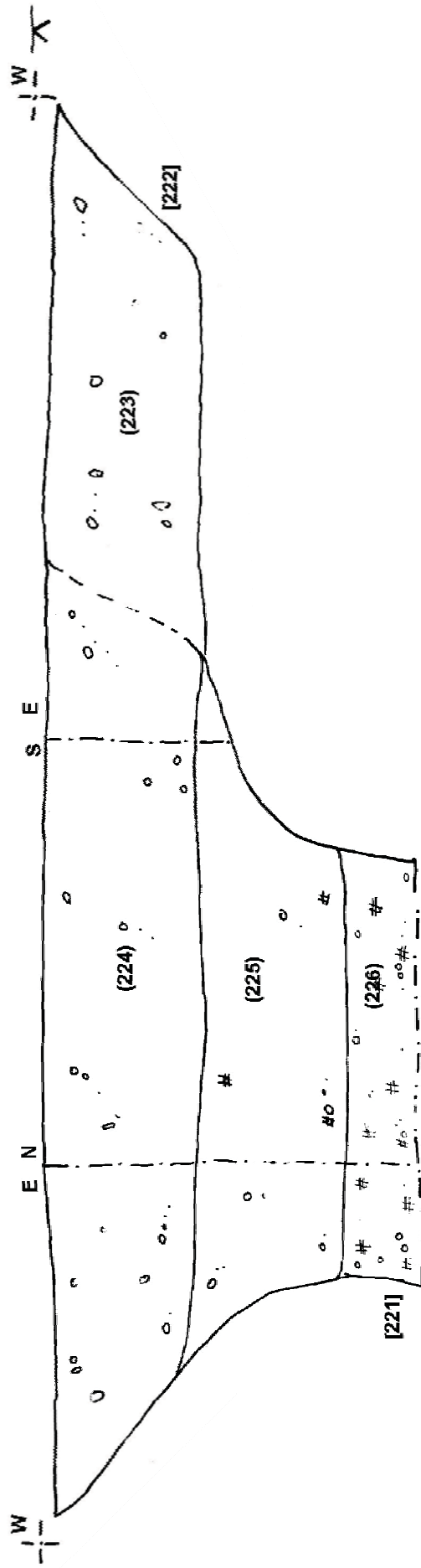


Figure 6 Composite section of [221], [222].

A small later gully ([238] (239)) cut across the top of ditch [251]. The profile of this ditch was very shallow and is likely to be a small drainage gully. The fill contained both Saxon and Late Roman pottery. A second shallow gully was cut into the top of the ditch at a different angle ([257] (258)) with no finds.

Another possible ditch/pit lies just to the east ([260] (261)). No pottery was found to date this feature

6.3 Trench 03 (Fig. 7, Plate 6)

Phase 3 - Saxon

Trench 03 revealed a rough surface and two very disturbed skeletons oriented roughly east-west. In grave [102], (101), an almost complete skull was noted along with arm bones and a clavicle. The second grave ([104] (103)) held a damaged skull and a few upper arm bones (Plate 6).

Both graves appeared to be cut through an earlier stony layer, possibly a surface of some kind. The bones were in a poor condition and appeared to be disturbed. Although a few sherds of Roman pottery was recovered from the ploughsoil, a tanged knife was recovered from grave [104] (103) suggesting that they could be Saxon in date.



Plate 6
Trench 03 showing
cobbled surface and
disturbed skeletons
at either end.

7. Discussion

7.1 Pre-Roman

Pottery finds had previously suggested the presence of Iron Age occupation of the site. However, no evidence was recovered for any pre-Roman activity with the earliest stratified finds dating from the late 1st century. Any Iron Age activity therefore is likely to be located elsewhere.

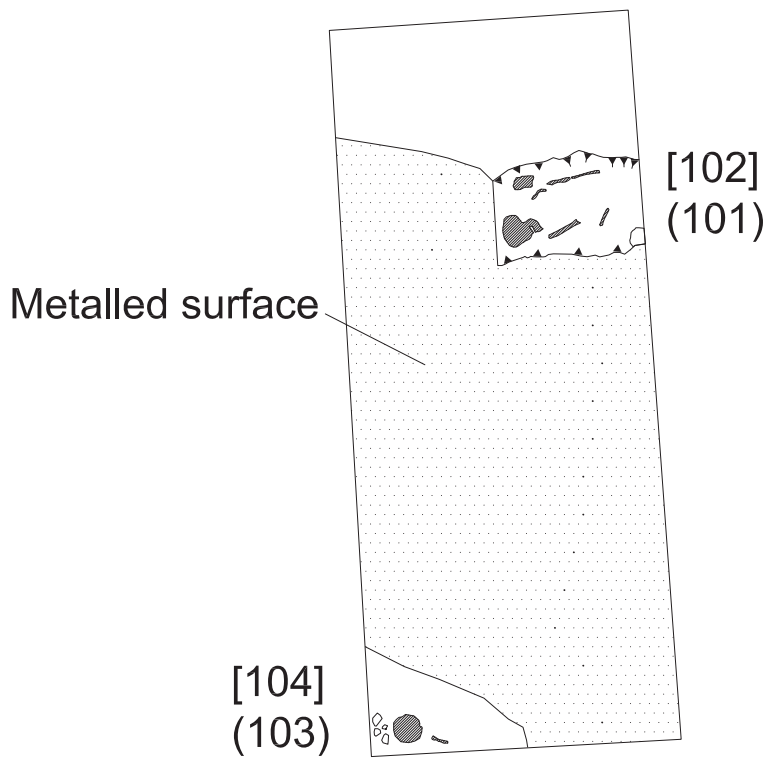
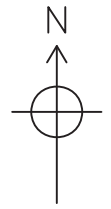


Fig. 7 Plan of Trench 03



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7.2 Roman

Earlier Roman

Previous work had suggested that a large settlement developed in the area from at least the mid 1st century AD, reaching its maximum extent during the 2nd – 3rd centuries. The pottery from both trenches 01 and 02 suggests definite activity in this area during the late 1st- mid 2nd century. Gully [036] contained over 200 sherds of pottery suggesting that the activity was fairly substantial. The presence of a 1st – 2nd century coin, although in a later context, also supports earlier activity.

Ditch [248] in Trench 02 also dates to the Flavian /Trajanic period, although the pottery suggests that the filling up of the ditch might have continued for some time. This feature is shown on the geophysical survey as the continuation of a large boundary ditch that appears to mark the southern edge of the town.

There are also remnants of features dating to the 2nd – 3rd century, with a number of small gullies in Trench 01 and a small pit in Trench 02 containing 2nd – 3rd century pottery. There also appears to be a great deal of pottery of this date appearing in later features in both trenches. These sherds are very small and abraded and are likely to have been disturbed from their original location by the digging of later features. An area of soil at the northern edge of T01 also contained late 2nd – early 3rd century pottery. If this represents an early ploughsoil of made-ground then the excavation of the graves would have disturbed this layer, fragmenting and disturbing the pottery.

The function of these earlier features remains unknown. However, the later Roman and Saxon features are extensive and there is likely to have been more earlier features in this area that have been destroyed by the later activity.

Later Roman

Previous work suggested that the town shrunk during the 4th century. However, despite being on the eastern edge of the site, there is strong evidence for 3rd – 4th century activity in both trenches. This includes several features as well as large numbers of late 3rd – 4th century sherds residual in later features. In particular, a large Early Saxon pit in Trench 02 ([256]) contained substantial quantities of Roman pottery dating from the later 1st century through till at least the mid 4th century AD (Appendix I). This was cut through the large ditch previously noted in Trench 02 and suggests that although the ditch may have early Roman origins, the final filling up of the ditch happened in the late 3rd - mid 4th century.

A large boundary/drainage ditch in Trench 01 lies on a similar alignment to the large earlier ditch in trench 02 and may reflect the earlier alignment, particularly if it remained a feature until the 4th century. The pottery from the ditch in Trench 01 also suggests a 3rd – 4th century date although a coin from the house of Valentinian (364-378) suggests that the final backfilling of the ditch happened after AD 365. A post-hole cut into the fill on the northern edge could suggest the possibility of a structure or fence of some kind.

The rubble incorporated into later, Saxon features in Trench 02 could well be demolition debris and suggests the presence of stone buildings nearby at some point during the Roman period.

7.3 Late Roman Cemetery

The stratigraphy in Trench 01 clearly indicates that the graves post-date the large boundary ditch and must therefore be 4th century or later. All of the earlier material recovered from the graves was fragmentary and abraded. The presence of this residual material is most likely a result of disturbance during the creation of the cemetery.

The layout of the graves (east – west), and the position of the skeletons lying face-up with their heads to west and with their hands crossed, as well as the lack of grave goods, suggests that this could be a Christian cemetery. There is evidence that some of them were wrapped in shrouds and may have been kept elsewhere for a period before being brought to this place for burial (Appendix III).

7.4 Saxon

Previous work in the area had suggested continuous occupation with a thin scatter of handmade Anglo-Saxon pottery across the site as well as an antler die stamp used for making impressions on pottery. Most of the pottery from the later features dates to the early – middle Saxon period (AD450-850), and would therefore support the idea of continuous occupation across the site (Appendix II).

There is little evidence for Saxon activity to the north with just two intrusive sherds of Saxon pottery from Trench 01. However, there were 27 unstratified sherds from the ploughsoil over the area, though it seems that the features and the bulk of Saxon activity lies to the south.

The Saxon features lie on a different alignment to the earlier Roman ones at a 45° angle and several other features on a similar alignment can be seen on the geophysical survey, mostly to the south although the large number of earlier features may well have obscured later ones.

The Saxon features in Trench 02 were very dense and intercutting and although some phasing was evident, it was not possible to establish many relationships especially with the dry conditions. The features included several pits and gullies as well as a possible well or sump being used for drainage.

The two sets of gullies noted are shown on the geophysical survey running for some distance. Several of the gullies were filled with stone rubble. This could be demolition rubble from earlier features or even robbed from Roman buildings and used to create a hard standing of some kind. These features are visible on the geophysical survey running for some distance and may represent a droveway or track of some kind and associated drainage

The area around Trench 03 was known as the ‘Old Churchyard’ prior to enclosure of the parish, and an early estate map records an isolated churchyard. Although the area was badly disturbed, the two skeletons were both aligned east-west and one was buried with an iron tanged knife, typical of Anglo-Saxon grave goods. A pierced Roman coin (probably for hanging as a pendant) was also recovered from the topsoil.

Some 200 years earlier workman had uncovered Anglo-Saxon graves somewhere in this area, and this may be part of a Saxon cemetery to the east of the main settlement area.

7.5 Summary

- The site has activity dating from the late 1st century AD through to the fourth century.
- The earlier features are consistent with the north-south and east-west boundary ditches and features recorded on the geophysical survey.
- The earlier features are obscured and disturbed by later 4th century features including a 4th century AD cemetery which lies on the far eastern edge of the town.
- Early – mid Saxon pottery suggests continued occupation, but south of the Roman cemetery.
- Saxon features include a possible droveway at a 45° angle to the earlier Roman features.
- The Saxon activity appears concentrated south of the cemetery, and geophysical evidence suggests that other Saxon features also exist south of the main Roman settlement.
- A possible Saxon cemetery lies to the east of the main Saxon area.

8. Archive and Publication

All work was archived under the accession number XA140.2005 and will be deposited with Leicestershire Museums. Appendix V lists the Archive contents .

9. Acknowledgements

The site was directed by Vicki Score with Dave Parker, Gavin Speed, Nick Cooper, Elizabeth Johnson and Harriet Jacklin from ULAS and Jeremy Taylor from University of Leicester and Pete Liddle from Leicestershire County Council. The fieldwork was undertaken with the help of many volunteers without whom this project could not have been completed.

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May 2007