

**FORMER GPO SORTING OFFICE,
PRIORY MILLS,
WELLS,
SOMERSET**

NGR: ST 543 454

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

**July 2008
Report No. 607**

Quality Assurance

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SUMMARY

During April 2008 Foundations Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at the former GPO sorting office, Priory Mills, Wells (NGR: ST 543 454). The work was commissioned by CgMs Consulting, in response to a condition of planning permission.

Planning permission has been granted for the erection of 24 dwellings with access roads, car parking and landscaping and the demolition of disused buildings (planning reference: 042004/008). The archaeological work was targeted on the whole development area.

The watching brief did not reveal any archaeologically significant features, deposits or artefacts.

GLOSSARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Archaeology

For the purpose of this project archaeology is taken to mean the study of past human societies through their material remains from prehistoric times to the modern era. No rigid upper date limit has been set, but AD 1900 is used as a general cut-off point.

CBM

Ceramic Building Material.

Medieval

The period between the Norman Conquest (AD 1066) and *circa* AD 1500.

Natural

In archaeological terms this refers to the undisturbed natural geology of a site, in this case, chalk.

NGR

National Grid Reference from the Ordnance Survey Grid.

OD

Ordnance datum; used to express a given height above sea-level.

OS

Ordnance Survey

Post-medieval

The period from *circa* AD 1500 onwards

Roman

The period from AD 43 to AD 410

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 During April 2008 Foundations Archaeology undertook an archaeological watching brief at the former GPO sorting office, Priory Mills, Wells (NGR: ST 543 454). The work was commissioned by CgMs Consulting, in response to a condition of planning permission.
- 1.2 Planning permission has been granted for the erection of 24 dwellings with access roads, car parking and landscaping and the demolition of disused buildings (planning reference: 042004/008). The archaeological work was targeted on the whole development area.
- 1.3 The watching brief was undertaken in accordance with the Specification prepared by CgMs (2008). The project was also undertaken in accordance with the *Standard and Guidance for Archaeological Watching Briefs* issued by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (1994, revised 2001) and Archaeological Guidance Paper 4: *Archaeological Watching Briefs: (guidelines)* issued by English Heritage (London Region).
- 1.4 This document presents the findings of the archaeological watching brief and conforms to the specification set out in Appendices 4 and 5 of *The Management of Archaeological Projects* (English Heritage 1991).

2 SITE LOCATION

- 2.1 The site is bound by West Street to the west, properties fronting West Street to the north, St. Andrews Mews to the south and Strawberry Way to the west. The site is approximately 0.37ha in extent.
- 2.2 The geology of the site is shown by the British Geological Survey (sheet 280) as consisting of Keuper Marl.
- 2.3 The site is flat and at c. 32m OD. The topography is unlikely to reflect the original topography as the site is covered in concrete/tarmac.

3 PROJECT BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Planning permission has been granted for the redevelopment of the site.
- 3.2 The site has previously been the subject of a desk-based assessment (CgMs 2006), which concluded that the site had a low archaeological potential for all periods. However, it lies within the medieval town and adjacent to the medieval Priory of St Johns and is therefore defined as an Area of High Archaeological Potential in Local Plan Policy EN13
- 3.3 Somerset County Council therefore considered that the site had the potential to contain medieval and Post-Medieval remains. This in no way prejudiced the works against the recovery of finds or features relating to other periods.

4 AIMS

- 4.1 The aims of the watching brief were to gather high quality data from the direct observation of archaeological deposits in order to provide sufficient information to establish the nature, extent, preservation and potential of any surviving archaeological remains.
- 4.2 These aims were to be achieved by the pursuit of the following specific objectives.
- i) to define, identify and record any archaeological deposits on site, and date these where possible.
 - ii) to attempt to characterise the nature of the archaeological sequence and recover as much information as possible about the spatial patterning of features present on the site.
 - iii) where possible to recover a well dated stratigraphic sequence and recover coherent artefact, ecofact and environmental samples.

5 METHODOLOGY

- 5.1 The layout of the groundworks is shown on Figure 2. The groundworks were carried out using of a mechanical excavator fitted with a wide toothless bucket, working under the constant supervision of an experienced archaeologist. When features or deposits of potential archaeological significance were noted, they were to be closely examined and defined, and excavated by hand where appropriate. All spoil tips were scanned by eye for unstratified finds.

6 RESULTS

- 6.1 Natural yellow to light brown and grey green gravels were seen only in the southwest corner of the site, elsewhere the basal deposit identified consisted of a mottled reddish brown sandy clay, which was occasionally moderately silty. It was encountered at an average depth of 1.3m from the modern ground surface. The trenches were 0.60m wide and were between 0.70m and 1.50m deep.
- 6.2 The footings for the northeastern block and the northern part of the new boundary wall were excavated between the 15th and 17th April. The basal deposit of sandy clay was reached at an average depth of 1.30m from the modern ground surface. It was overlain by a make-up layer of reddish-brown to grey brown clay sand (104) up to 0.50m thick, which contained brick and concrete rubble. This layer was overlain in the southern part of the block by a 0.05m thick layer of black-brown clay (103), but was elsewhere directly overlain by a further make-up layer of dark grey brown silty sand (102). Layer

(103) and part of the surrounding area of (102) was overlain by a hardcore layer (101) associated with a haul road constructed to facilitate site access.

- 6.3 The southeastern block and southern half of the boundary wall were excavated between the 23rd and 28th April. The basal deposit of sandy clay was reached at an average depth of 1.35m from the modern ground surface. It was overlain by a greyish red make up layer (204) containing small stones and brick fragments up to 0.90m thick. Layer (204) was overlain by a grey brown clay (203) with small stone inclusions, up to 0.20m thick; itself beneath a greyish black hardcore surface of sand and gravel (202), up to 0.10m thick. This was overlain in turn by a mottled reddish grey sand and gravel hardcore layer (201), up to 0.15m thick.
- 6.4 The western block formed an 'L' shape and was excavated between 21st and 29th April. In the northernmost, east-west aligned, part of the block the basal deposit of sandy clay was encountered at an average depth of 1.35m from the modern ground surface. In this area the basal deposit was overlain by a thick layer of stone rubble in a red and yellow sand matrix (305). This deposit comprised an irregular dump of material, suggesting a make up layer, rather than any form of deliberate surface. Rare fragments of red brick were present within the layer. Layer (305) was sealed beneath a layer of grey brown sandy clay (304), up 0.15m thick forming the bedding for a thin layer of concrete and tarmac surfacing (303). This surface was overlain in turn by a further hardcore layer of brick rubble, stone and sand (302) up to 0.30m thick; itself beneath a layer of grey sand and gravel hardcore (301).
- 6.5 The north-south aligned part of the western block was excavated between 28th and 29th April. In the northern part of the area, the stratigraphic sequence was identical to that given in paragraph.6.4 above. In the southern and central parts, the natural gravels were observed, overlain by a thick red brown deposit of silty clay (404), approximately 0.4m thick with very occasional flecks of charcoal and brick fragments. This layer was sealed beneath a thin band of dark brown silty clay soil (403), up to 0.1m thick with frequent flecks of charcoal, but no finds. In turn this was overlain by a modern overburden of redeposited building rubble approximately 0.5m thick.
- 6.6 No archaeologically significant features, deposits or finds were present within the study area.

7 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The watching brief did not reveal any archaeological features. In general, visibility and recording conditions were good.
- 7.2 The natural gravels were only observed in the southwestern corner and central part of the site, with the basal deposit across the remainder of the site being a reddish brown sandy clay. It is not known whether this material represents an alluvial deposit atop the gravel, or a change in the natural; certainly across the greater part of the site it occurred at a similar level to the gravels and extended

below the depth that gravels might be expected. The nature of the excavations, which were driven by site conditions relating to the watertable, meant that footings trenches were excavated and concreted, before the next set of footings trenches were excavated. Regrettably the interface between the gravels and the sandy clay fell exactly on the line of one of these divisions.

- 7.3 Both the sandy clay and the gravels were overlain by made ground, generally in the form of a reddish brown sandy clay containing brick fragments. Some concrete was locally also incorporated into this material, but may be intrusive. In the northwest corner of the site, the basal layers were overlain by a dump of stone and sand, which also contained brick fragments and was presumably deposited at a similar date to the reddish brown sandy clay made-ground. No trace of an intact subsoil was identified during the course of the works. It remains possible, however, that the 'made-ground' consists of a Post-medieval ploughsoil into which brick fragments had become incorporated, with the dump of stone perhaps representing infilling of a 'wet-spot'.
- 7.4 The watching brief has indicated no potential for significant archaeological remains within the development area and a low potential within the immediate vicinity of the study area. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of archaeological finds, features or deposits within the surrounding area.

8 NATURE OF THE RECORD

- 8.1 The stratigraphic archive for the site consists of the following elements:

Watching brief record sheets
Plans
Photographs

- 8.2 The on-site methodologies used to recover any evidence were set out in the Specification prepared by CgMs Consulting (2008). In summary the following excavation methods were utilised; observation of all groundworks associated with the construction of the new building. All site recording was undertaken in accordance with the Specification. The records are available in the archive.
- 8.3 Following the completion of the Watching Brief an ordered, indexed, and internally consistent site archive has been compiled in accordance with Appendix 3 of The Management of Archaeological Projects (English Heritage 1991). This archive is currently held at Foundations Archaeology and will be deposited with Somerset County Museum under an accession code to be confirmed within six months.
- 8.4 A summary of the contents of this report is available from Project OASIS at <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/project/oasis/>

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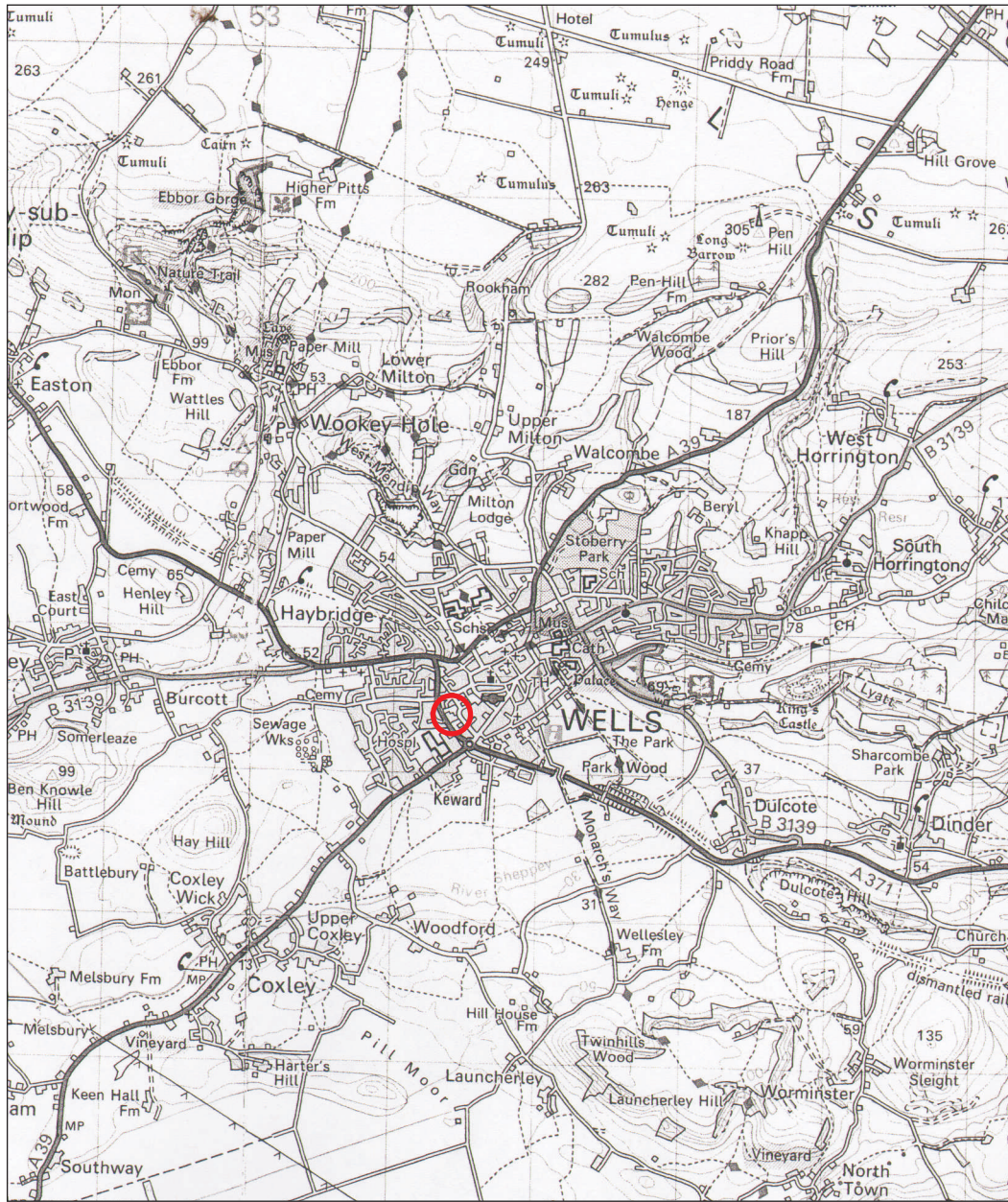
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10 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foundations Archaeology would like to thank Rob Bourn of CgMs Consulting for his assistance during the course of the project and the on-site groundworkers for their co-operation during the fieldwork phase of the works.



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FIGURE 1: Site Location



FIGURE 2: Site Plan