The excavation of a Second World War air raid shelter at New Venue, Court Drive, Dunstable

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SUMMARY

An archaeological investigation at the site known as New Venue, Dunstable, site code NVD 04, revealed an almost complete World War II air raid shelter.

INTRODUCTION

The site investigation at New Venue Dunstable was conducted by AOC Archaeology Group in advance of the redevelopment of the site by CDP Dunstable Limited. The investigation area is located approximately 1km to the northwest of Dunstable town centre at National Grid Reference (NGR) TL 0185 2246 (Fig. 1). The site is spread out within the grounds of Dunstable Park Recreation Centre.

An evaluation, comprising five machine excavated trenches, was carried out in November 2003. This was followed by strip and map recording which started in September 2006. A Roman cemetery and a World War II air raid shelter were uncovered during the excavation for the new children's playground.

The archaeological fieldwork was completed in December 2004. All of the work was recorded using the site code NVD 04. The archive for this deposit will be deposited and available for consultation upon request at Luton Museums Service.

GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The geology of the site consisted of middle chalk with localised shallow deposits of clay. At the time of the excavation the site was generally flat with a slight slope running east-west from 141.73mOD to 141.27mOD. The site on the western side of the leisure centre is known to have been landscaped during its lifetime as a park.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By the 1920s the British government was already beginning its preparations for the defence of Britain and its people. The memory of the bombing raids during World War I were still very fresh in the minds of the general public and the government were only to aware of the new German air force, the Luftwaffe, which was formed by 1935. With the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in 1933 and the collapse of the Disarmament Conference in May 1934, the British Government was forced to act in order to fully prepare the country for war (Risbey 2003).

In September 1935 the then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin published a circular entitled 'Air Raid Precautions' which invited local authorities to make plans to protect their people in the event that Britain should go to war (Smith 2005). Some towns responded by arranging the construction of public air raid shelters, however the country in general struggled to believe that there was an urgent threat, with relatively few towns erecting shelters. In 1938 Sir John Anderson devised a plan to protect the public with some kind of shelter should Britain go to war. These included public shelters, Anderson shelters, Morrison shelters and refuge rooms, (Smith 2005)

By 1939 a civil defence system was working alongside local government, with Air Raid Wardens patrolling neighbourhoods. By 3 September 1939 Britain and France had declared war with Germany and shortly after costal and shipping towns became the first victims of the war from the air.

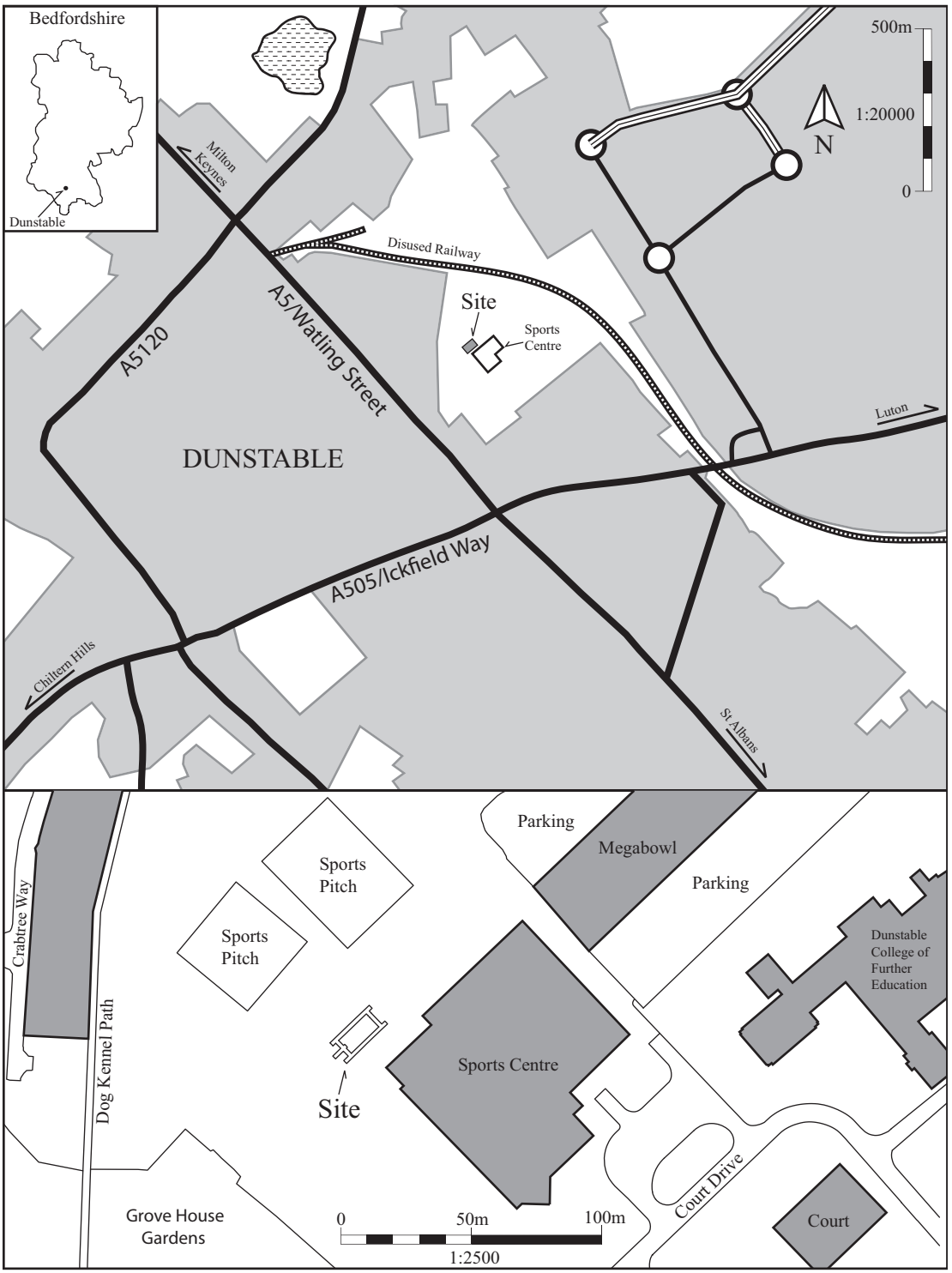

Figure 1: Site location

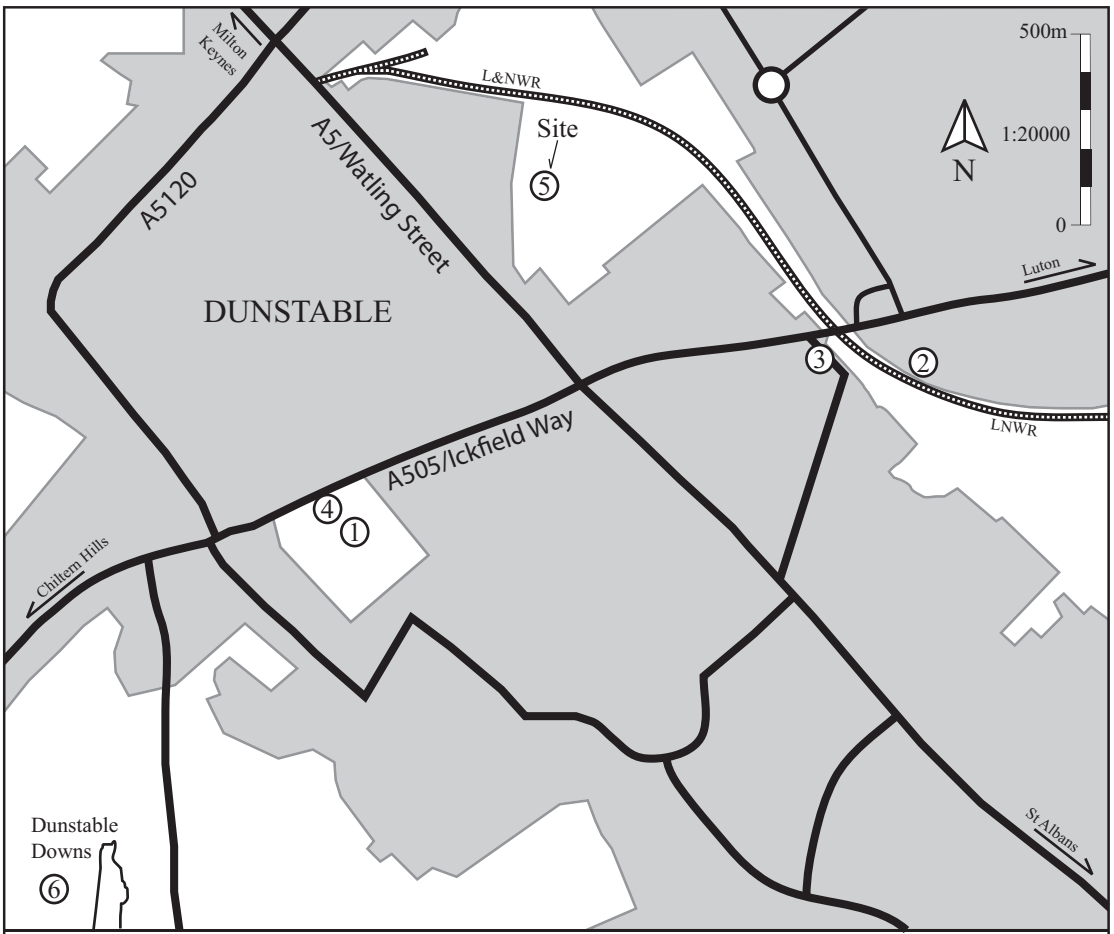

Figure 2: Location of WWII Civil Defence structures in Dunstable

DUNSTABLE AIR RAID SHELTER

AIR RAID SHELTER-EXTERNAL STRUCTURE (Plate 1)

The shelter was rectangular and measured 24m in length by 9.50m wide. It was aligned northeast-southwest and consisted of four adjoining corridors with an entrance corridor projecting from the southwest (Fig. 3). The shelter was constructed of prefabricated reinforced concrete within a construction cut, which was backfilled around the structure with chalk. The concrete was arranged in

Plate 1: Overview of air raid shelter

a simple system of adjoining bays. Each bay consisted of two rectangular solid concrete upright hoops (height 2.09m, width 1. 48m, depth 0.08m), the internal clearance height of which was 1.83m. The uprights were positioned at 0.84m intervals and between each pair of uprights; concrete panels formed the walls (three panels each) and roof (two panels). The panels measured 0.94m long (a 0.05m overlap at the end of each panel) by 0.66m wide and 0.04m deep. On the inside of each panel were three evenly-spaced concrete ribs that would have acted as spacers for the upright supports and also added strength to the structure. The roof panels were overlain by additional strips of concrete, presumably to seal the gaps between the panels.

This type of shelter is commonly known as a 'covered trench shelter'. In general, most covered trench shelters started off as open trenches, simply dug trenches revetted by timber, brick or stone. These would have developed into more stable and permanent shelters constructed from prefabricated concrete or steel frames and panels to support the trench edges and the concrete roof, (Lowry 2002).

The entrance to the structure was recorded at its western end. The opening which cut into the natural chalk was formed of a brick floor and two red brick walls, approximately 0.60m wide and 0.70m deep flanking a metal-framed opening, which may have supported a blast proof steel door. The cut was by backfilled with chalk.

Emergency exits were often included, which would have consisted of a vertical ladder leading to a ventilated manhole cover. Two such holes were recorded on site as square shaped, brick-lined openings. Two smaller holes in the roof were also recorded which were probably ventilation shafts.

The structure was overlain by a 0.50-0.65m thick layer of chalk. This deposit was probably deliberately deposited during its construction in what is known as the 'cut and cover' technique. The deposit would have formed extra overhead protection. This in turn was overlain by a 0.20m thick layer of topsoil, which sealed and camouflaged the shelter.

Internal Features (Fig. 4)

With the exception of the entrance corridor, all the corridors contained seating in the form of wooden benches that rested on wooden supports that were bolted into the concrete walls. These would have accommodated the general public when the air raid shelter was in use day and night during air raid

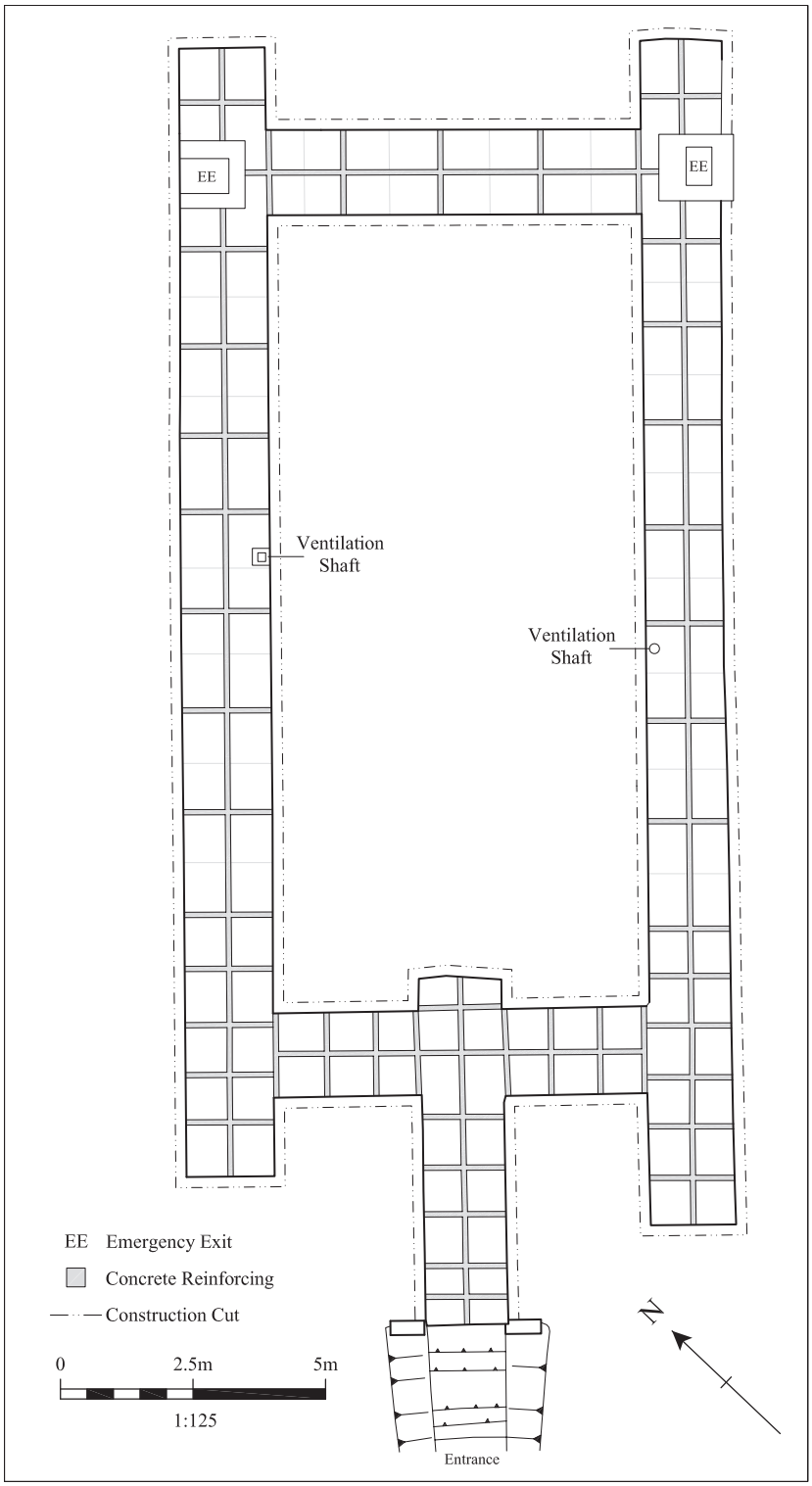

Figure 3: Exterior plan of the air raid shelter

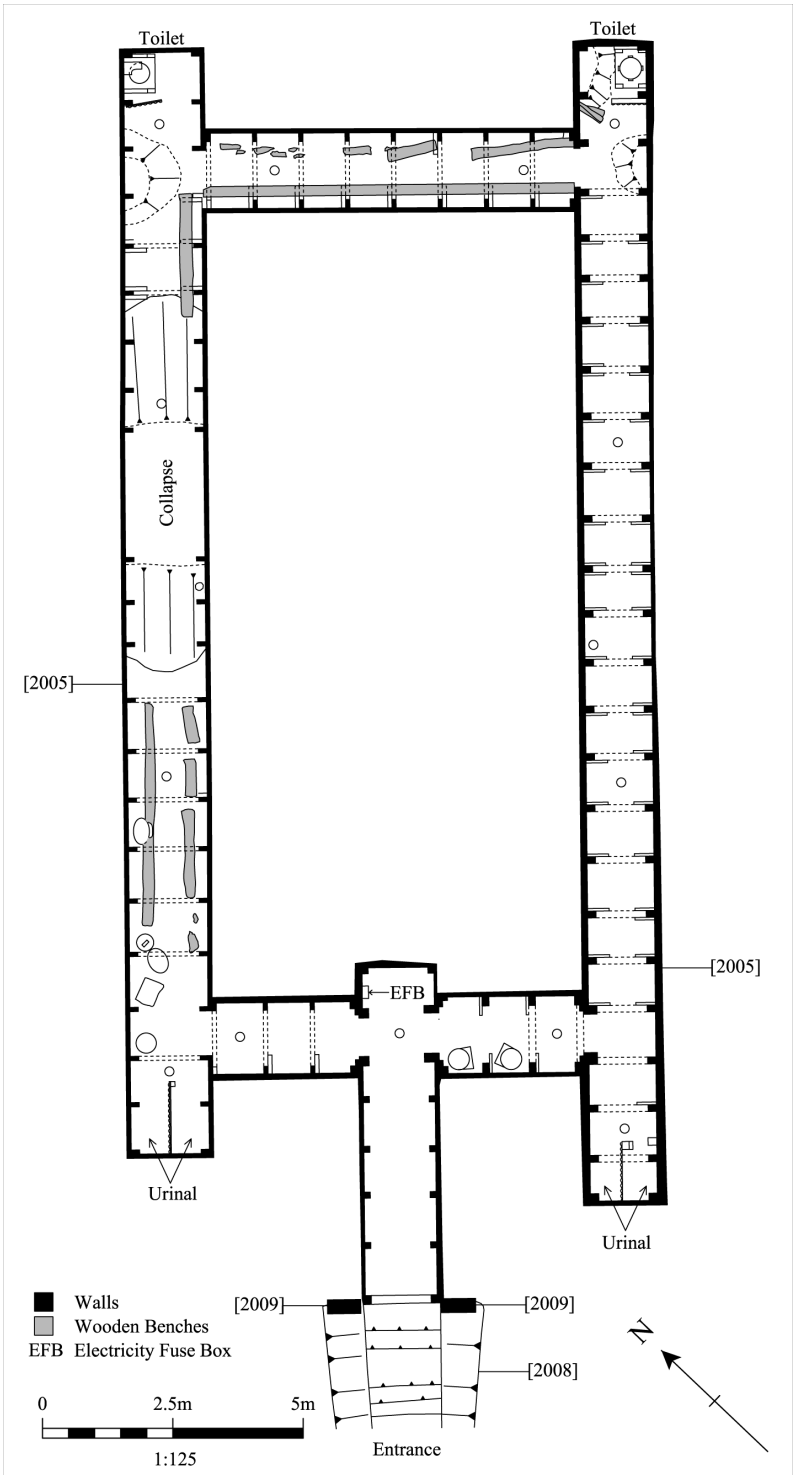

Figure 4: Interior plan of the air raid shelter (showing archaeological features below)

warnings. At the end of the entrance corridor was a small one metre square alcove which contained the remains of the bunkers electrical system. This powered 13 light fittings which were distributed evenly throughout the corridors. Not all shelters would have had electricity; many were lit by tallow candles in small wooden boxes.

At either ends of the east-west corridors were toilets. The toilet rooms in the far eastern corners of the corridors contained corrugated iron partitions with tin buckets built into a wooden bench structure on either side. The toilets in the west of the corridors only contained iron partitions and were perhaps used as urinals. In both cases the rooms would have been sealed off by a wooden door. The sanitary systems would have been very basic as sustained bombings were not anticipated (Lowry 2002).

Post World War II

It is clear that after the war, the shelter became derelict. It is unclear exactly when the shelter was abandoned and when it was concealed within the park. There is graffiti inside which dates to the 1950s and 1960s. It also appears that there was no attempt to remove all of the contents of the shelter as most of the fittings, though now rotten and broken, were still within it.

DISCUSSION

Unlike areas with a high proportion of ammunition factories, docks, railways, or large populations of people, Bedfordshire would have been a relatively low priority target for the German bombers. Bedfordshire's role during the war mainly involved the world of espionage and propaganda, with numerous sites acknowledge as playing vital roles in the secret war. However, various air fields were active during this period such as Tempsford Airfield (north Bedford) which was used to send special operations agents into France and the Royal Ordnance Factory at Elstow supplied many of the heavy bombs dropped over enemy territory during the war. . With the famous Bletchley Park nearby, many sites in Bedfordshire were used as radar stations especially the Meteorological Office in Dunstable. This camouflaged building provided data which helped crack the enigma code as well as help determine the date of the D Day landings.

Information complied in the 'Defence of Britain Project' states that Dunstable contained several defensive structures in case of invasion by German forces (Fig. 2). The positions of these structures suggest that two of the main roads into Dunstable were protected as well as the main railway line, and it is likely that the remaining north-south roads leading into Dunstable would also have been defended. In relation to these structures the air raid shelter was positioned to the north east of the town's main cross roads and adjacent to the railway line running west. The reason for its placement there remains unclear however its location within Dunstable Park might have given the structure a form of camouflage and security away from the more open town centre.

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