

BRIMPTON-ALDERMASTON PIPELINE, BERKSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF AND EXCAVATION

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with contributions by Steve Ford, John Letts and Jane Timby

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological watching brief was commissioned by British Gas Southern to examine the route of the Brimpton to Aldermaston gas pipeline during its construction in July and August 1993. The route of the pipeline is illustrated in Fig 1.

A desktop study and limited fieldwalking and geophysical surveys were carried out prior to the construction of the pipeline (Bonner 1993). The desktop study referred to a number of sites and finds from the vicinity, most of which were single sherds of pottery and struck flints found during the Kennet Valley Survey (Lobb 1981; 1983). The fieldwalking located two possible flint scatters but both the geophysical survey in these areas and observations made during the watching brief found no indication of subsoil features.

METHODOLOGY

After the topsoil had been removed, the easement for the pipeline and the resultant spoil heaps were examined for archaeological finds and deposits. In two areas, however, the topsoil removal was supervised by an archaeologist: at the possible location of a flint scatter in section D to E (Fig 1) and at the presumed location of the Roman road (E, SU 5769 6481). The topsoil was not completely

removed in sections A through to E (Fig 1) but any undetected archaeological remains in these areas are likely to have remained relatively undamaged as only those features in the exact line of the pipe trench were under threat. Where possible, open sections of the pipe and drainage trench were also inspected.

The projected route of the Roman road

The projected route of the Silchester to Cirencester Roman road crossed the route of the pipeline near Lower Wasing Farm (Fig 1, E). Previous excavations on other sections of the road had revealed flanking ditches and metalled surfaces: two small V-shaped ditches were observed 27m apart but without any road surface at SU 5687 6525 (Lobb 1977, 39) and a V-shaped ditch (at SU 57100 65180) and metalled surface (at SU 57230 65100) have also been recorded (Bonner, 1993). Further afield, the ditches flanking this road have been recorded at Aldermaston Soke (SU 62 63) (Anon, 1962).

Once the topsoil had been removed in this part of the pipeline no indication of the Roman road could be seen. The only features revealed were several dark stripes crossing the easement. These were excavated but proved to be very shallow (0.10-0.20m) and filled with topsoil. No features which could be interpreted as flanking ditches for the Roman road were observed and, despite monitoring the excavation of the pipe trench in this area, no evidence of ditches or road surface was

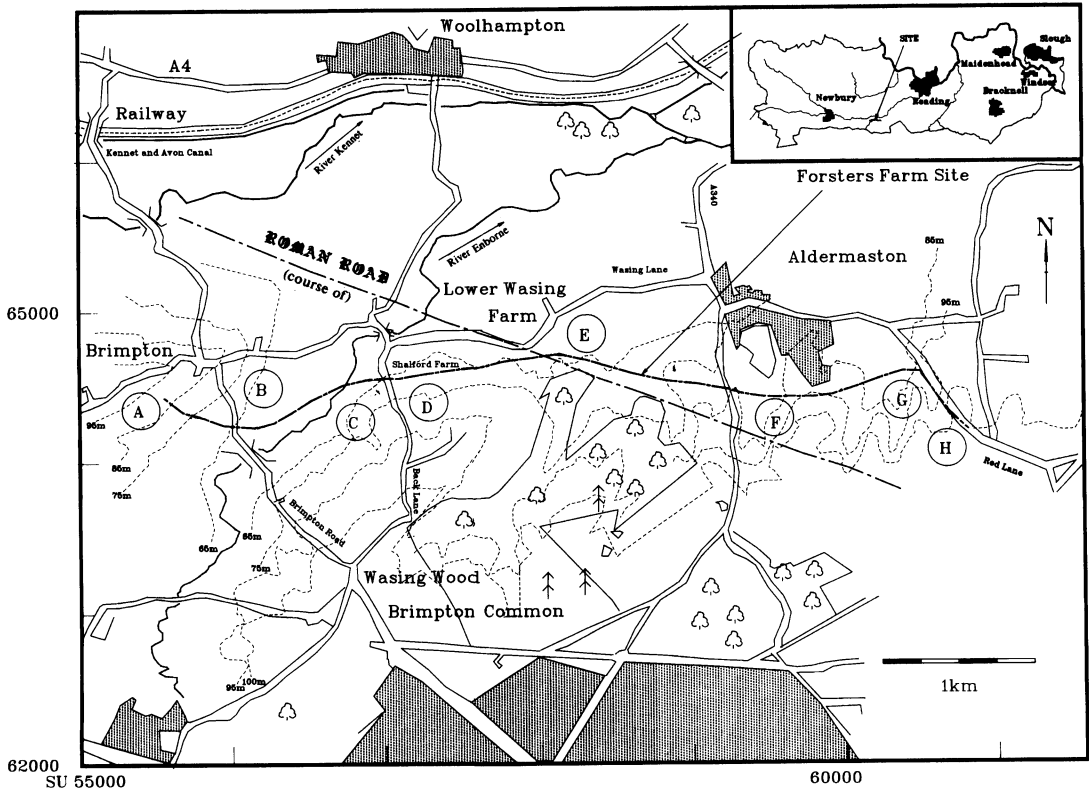


Figure 1 Route of the pipeline showing the Forsters Farm site

seen. Observation of the pipe trench did show, however, that no overlying alluvial or colluvial deposits were masking the presence of the road. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to determine whether the line of the Roman road simply does not follow its projected course or whether the repeated cultivation of this area over several centuries has destroyed any evidence for the road.

The Forsters Farm site

A large spread was located in section E to F occupying the full width of the easement and extending for some 20m along its length (SU 58690 64690, Fig 1). A slot was excavated through the spread 0.60m wide and 21m long, following the route of the pipe trench. Deposits beyond the pipe trench itself were

not under threat and were offered additional protection from construction traffic with terram matting.

The fill of the slot was removed in 0.20m spits and consisted of three layers (50, 52 and 53) apparently lying within a hollow (Fig 2, F3): the uppermost layer (50) was noticeably darker than the others and comprised a stony loam mix, whereas the lower layers (52 and 53) were stony, silty, clays only distinguished by a slight variation in colour. The natural bedrock also consisted of a stony, silty, clay.

The slot through the spread (F3) produced 69 sherds of Prehistoric and 106 sherds of Medieval pottery. The lowest spit through the slot produced only Prehistoric pottery and the upper levels contained a higher proportion of Medieval pottery, with a

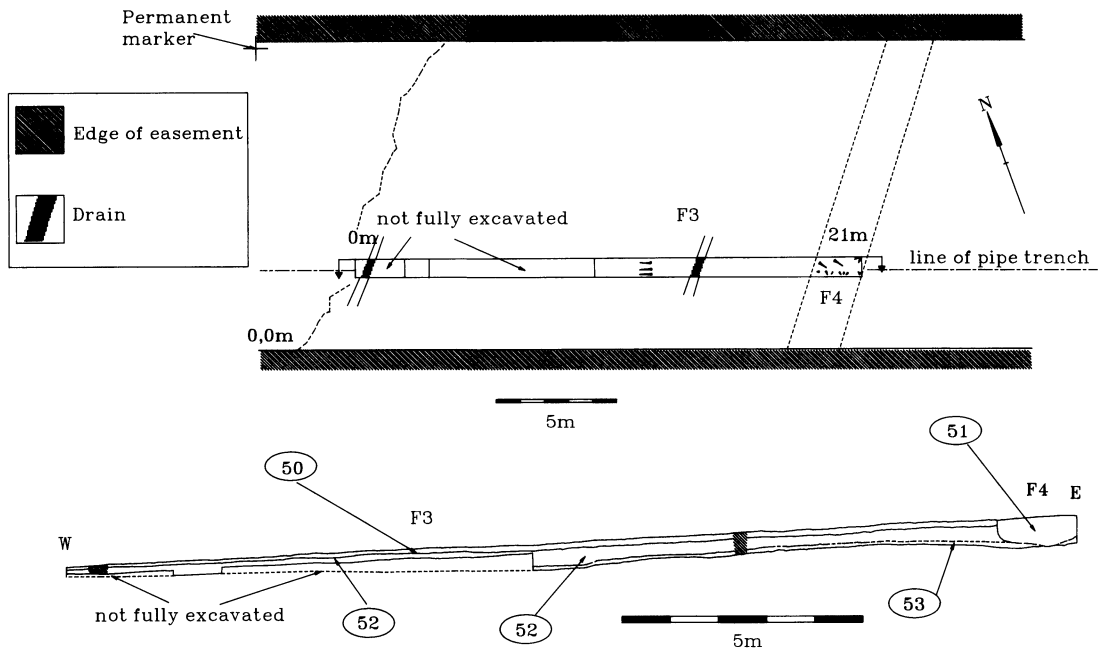


Figure 2 Plan and section of the Forsters Farm site

mixture of both Medieval and Prehistoric pottery from the middle spits. Many of the Prehistoric sherds were in a severely abraded condition which may suggest redeposition or prolonged exposure to weathering. Quantities of burnt flint were recovered from all contexts, although considerably more came from the upper spits. On the contrary, the small number of struck flints recovered were more prevalent in the lower levels.

A shallow U-shaped ditch 0.65m deep and 1.40m wide (F4) crossed the eastern edge of the spread. Twelve sherds of Medieval

pottery and eight sherds of Prehistoric pottery, including one that can be more closely assigned to the later Bronze Age, were recovered from its fill. The ditch is, therefore, of Medieval or later date and clearly cuts the layers in F3 which contained Medieval pottery (Fig 2).

The samples taken for charred plant remains were analysed by John Letts but few seeds were recovered (Table 1). Those from the uppermost layer in F3 (50) included an example of bread wheat which is typical of the post-Roman period but other seeds from both layer

Table 1 Charred plant remains

Taxa:	Cereal (indeterminate)	cf <i>Hordeum vulgare</i> (barley)	<i>Triticum aestivum</i> cf <i>aestivum</i> (bread wheat)	<i>Rumex sp</i> (dock)	<i>Galium sp</i> (cleavers)
Spit 1 F3 (50)	2	–	1	1	1
Spit 2 F3 (50)	4	1	–	–	–
Spit 3 F4 (51)	1	–	–	–	–

50 and the fill of the ditch (51) are typical of both Iron Age and Saxon assemblages.

POTTERY, by Jane Timby

The moderately small assemblage of *c* 195 sherds of pottery fell broadly into two chronological periods: Prehistoric and Medieval. The Prehistoric pottery unfortunately did not include any featured sherds. Most of the pieces were in very abraded condition suggesting redeposited or exposed material. The character of the fabric with predominantly fine calcined flint temper is suggestive of later Bronze Age traditions in the Aldermaston region (cf Cowell *et al* 1980, 22).

The Medieval sherds included examples of handmade cooking pots in sand and flint-tempered wares current in the 11th to mid-12th century and decorated jugs/pitchers dating to the mid-12th to 14th centuries. Several of the fabrics can be paralleled with material from Silchester amphitheatre dating from the later 12th century onwards (Timby 1989, 95ff).

STRUCK FLINT by Steve Ford

Eighteen flakes and five spalls made on local gravel flint were found, in addition to one spall of dubious antiquity. The pieces are of Prehistoric date and would not be out of context in a later Bronze Age assemblage, but are otherwise undiagnostic.

DISCUSSION

Unfortunately, it is difficult to provide a reliable interpretation of the evidence given the very limited nature of the excavation at the Forsters Farm site. The excavation revealed a series of layers which fill a large hollow (F3), part of which was subsequently cut by a ditch (F4). It was not possible to establish how far the hollow extends beyond the limits of the easement.

The artefacts retrieved from the hollow illustrate an indistinct division between the lower and the upper levels. The lowest spit produced pottery which is exclusively Prehistoric and likely to be of later Bronze Age date, whereas the layers above this contained a mixture of Prehistoric and Medieval pottery (11th to 14th centuries), with increasingly more Medieval pottery coming from the higher levels. The ditch (F4) is Medieval or later.

It is not clear whether the main feature (F3) is a natural hollow or a man-made terrace. On balance, however, there are two likely interpretations for the site: the first is that the hollow is a natural feature which has become infilled with material as a result of its close proximity to some form of human activity, the second is that the feature was originally a natural phenomenon which was later used to site a Medieval structure. The pottery points to activity taking place in two distinct periods: later Bronze Age and Medieval (12th century). No in situ later Bronze Age activity was apparent although the presence of albeit abraded fragments of this fragile pottery suggests that an occupation site of this date may be in the near vicinity. Once the Prehistoric material had accumulated in the hollow it was perhaps little disturbed by ploughing during the Iron Age, Roman and Saxon periods. Subsequent nearby Medieval activity may have then contributed to the fill of the hollow. The quantity and condition of the Medieval pottery would be somewhat surprising if it were the result of Medieval manuring practice. While the formation processes associated with manuring assemblages are little understood, it seems implausible that such a density of finds could have accumulated by these means. A likely explanation is that the Medieval finds are the remains of an occupation midden for a nearby site. With regard to the second interpretation, apart from a few fragments of brick and tile no structural evidence was seen. However, the excavation was of such a limited extent it was not possible to investigate this theory fully.

If we assume that the discovery does indicate Medieval occupation, the location of the site at some distance from the village of Aldermaston suggests that it may have been an isolated settlement which had ‘budded off’ from the existing village to create an assart or new colony; or it perhaps reflects the long standing tradition of isolated settlement stretching back to Saxon times (Dyer 1990).

The Kennet Valley and its flanks are noted for the density of later Bronze Age occupation sites which have come to light as a result of the rescue excavations of the 1970’s and early 1980’s (eg Butterworth *et al* 1992; Bradley *et al* 1980), subsequent evaluations taking place as a part of the planning process (eg Miles and Collard 1986; Ford 1990) and evidence from fieldwalking studies (Lobb 1983). The discovery of later Bronze Age evidence at Forsters Farm, is not, therefore, unduly surprising and the discovery adds to the overall impression of a well utilised landscape at this time. However, despite being able to place the later Bronze Age evidence in a wider context, the actual nature of the Forsters Farm site remains unknown.

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