

Summary

- An archaeological watching brief was undertaken during the groundworks for two house plots on land adjacent to The Steer Arms, High Street, Belton, North Lincolnshire.
- A single pit of late Iron Age date was exposed in the footings of Plot 1, while an undated pit was seen in the foundation trenches of Plot 3.
- No further features of archaeological significance were observed during the excavation of the two house plots.



Figure 1: Location map at scale 1:12 500.
The development site is shown in red.
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1.0 Introduction

Pre-Construct Archaeology (Lincoln) was commissioned by Brinkley Homes to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the groundworks for two residential properties on land adjacent to The Steer Arms, High Street, Belton, North Lincolnshire.

These works were undertaken to fulfil the objectives of a formal project brief issued by the North Lincolnshire SMR, and a project specification prepared by Pre-Construct Archaeology (Lincoln). This approach is consistent with the recommendations of *'Lincolnshire Archaeological Handbook: A Manual of Archaeological Practice'* (LCC, 1998), *Archaeology & Planning: Planning Policy Guidance Note 16* (Department of the Environment, 1990) and *Standards and guidance for archaeological watching briefs* (IFA, 1994 as revised).

Copies of this report have been deposited with the client, the local planning authority and the County Sites and Monuments Record. Reports will also be deposited at North Lincolnshire Museum, along with an ordered project archive for long-term storage and curation.

2.0 Site location and description (figs. 1 & 2)

The village of Belton is within the administrative district of North Lincolnshire on the Isle of Axholme, approximately 2km north of Epworth and 7km south of Crowle.

The development is to the south-east of the village centre, approximately 250m south-east of the parish church, on the east side of the High Street, immediately to the north of the Steer Arms public house. The development site comprises a large sub-rectangular plot of land, bordered on the south side by the Steer Arms public house with neighbouring open fields to the east, to the north by the rear boundaries of properties which front onto Meadowbank, and to the east by open fields. At the beginning of the watching brief, the site had been cleared of vegetation with the exception of some mature trees on the street frontage. The two plots that are the subject of the watching brief, are located in the northern half of the development area, nearest to the High Street, approximately 10m from the road.

The local drift geology of the area consists of silt and clay, which overlies a solid geology of Permo-Triassic Mercia Mudstone (British Geological Survey, 1969).

Central National Grid Reference: SE 7846 0611

3.0 Planning background

Planning permission was granted for the erection of four dwellings, subject to conditions; including one requiring a programme of archaeological works covering plots 1 and 3 (planning ref. S04/1782/35).

4.0 Archaeological and historical background

Belton is one of the settlements of the Isle of Axholme, an area of slightly raised land among the low-lying wetlands of the Humberhead Levels, artificially drained by the Dutch engineer Vermuyden in the reign of Charles I. The Isle of Axholme, formerly contiguous with the Manor of Epworth, is described in a local history of the early 20th century as *'about 38,000 acres of land, and comprises at the present day the parishes of Althorpe, Belton, Crowle, Epworth, Haxey, Luddington, Owston, Amcotts, Eastoft, Keadby, Wroot and Garthorpe. It is bordered on the east by the River Trent, on the north by the Old Idle and Don courses, and on the south by the river Bykersdike'* (Dunston, p. 3).

It has been suggested that some of the drains bordering the Isle of Axholme (the Turnbridge Dike to the west, and the Bykers Dike to the south) were first cut during the Roman occupation, to improve communications and transport of materials for the legions (Van de Noort and Ellis, 1997, p.21).

At the time of the Domesday Survey, in AD 1086, Belton was already a small town, with a taxable population of 43 households. The farmland was chiefly arable, as Belton lies on higher ground which could be cultivated with little need for artificial drainage – the agriculture of the lower-lying settlements of the Isle of Axholme included large areas of seasonal pasture, subject to flooding. There were also extensive woodlands, of which some were managed as woodland pasture. Commercial fishing was taking place on a large scale: 11 fisheries are recorded, presumably on the River Torne (Williams and Martin, 1992, pp. 954 and 962).

Romano-British pottery has previously been discovered in the vicinity of the site indicating that remains of this date may survive below ground. The site also lies within the area of the former medieval settlement of Churchtown and therefore may contain deposits dating to this period.

5.0 Methodology

The groundworks began on 24th July when the foundation trenches for plot 1 were excavated and continued on 25th July with the excavation of the footings of plot 3. Excavation was carried out using a JCB 3CX 180° excavator using a 0.4m flat-bladed digging bucket. This produced foundation trenches 0.5m in width, and generally 0.9-1.1m deep.

All archaeological deposits or features observed were sample excavated and recorded on standard context record sheets. Sections were drawn at scale 1:20, and features were located on an overall site plan. A black and white and colour photographic record of all groundworks monitored was also maintained: a selection of the colour photographs appears in Appendix 1. The watching brief was carried out by the author.

6.0 Results

Plot 1 (figs. 3 and 5)

The underlying natural geological deposits in the area of Plot 1 consisted of a mid red/grey marl, context (103) exposed at the base of all of the foundation trenches. This was sealed by a dark greyish brown sandy clay subsoil, up to 0.30m deep (102), overlain by c. 0.2m of modern topsoil, 101, a dark greyish-brown sandy clay, only slightly lighter than the subsoil.

In the area of plot 1, the topsoil was sealed below a layer of recently deposited rubble (100), placed by the contractor to landscape what had been a steep slope from the road. This material was a dark grey sandy clay containing frequent limestone pebbles and brick and tile rubble; it was at its thickest at the west end of the site where it was c. 0.7m deep, and progressively thinned eastwards across the plot, tailing off shortly before the easternmost foundation trenches.

On the south side of the plot, two features were seen cutting the subsoil. These were both filled with a topsoil-like material, which contained modern tile fragments and occasional chunks of concrete. The westerly pit [105] was not bottomed, as it only clipped the foundation trench. However, the easterly one [107] lay directly below the foundation trenches, and was machined out to natural. It proved to be sub-rectangular in plan, 0.8m (E-W) by 1.5m (N-S) and 2m deep. These pits were the stanchion bases of a pole barn, which occupied this area of the site and was dismantled some 10 years ago (B Brinkley, *pers. comm.*).

Between these features, a further pit was seen on the south side of plot 1 – pit [109]. This was sealed below the subsoil. It had a concave gently-sloping eastern side, but a much steeper west side with a shallow bowl-shaped base but with a deeper ‘U’ shaped portion on the west side. It was filled with clean, dark greyish brown sandy clay (108). A single sherd was recovered from pit fill (106) and has been identified as coming from a large jar, with multiple cordons on the shoulder. This has been dated to the late Iron Age and is comparable with those from Dragonby (type 3 or type 15 – see appendix 2).

Plot 3 (figs. 4 and 6)

The sequence of topsoil, subsoil and underlying natural seen in plot 1 (contexts 301-303) was exactly imitated in plot 3. At the east end, a similar (albeit shallower) layer of modern rubble was also present (300) – the product of recent landscaping works.

A large rectangular vertically sided pit was present in the middle of the plot, but this was dismissed as modern contamination – its vertical sides immediately identified it as being machine-cut and it was interpreted as a pit excavated for percolation tests. At the east side of the plot a further pit was seen [307]. This had regular 70-80° sides and a ‘U’ shaped base. It was filled by a mid greyish brown sandy clay (306). Extensive digging here produced no finds, so a date for this feature could not be established.

7.0 Discussion and conclusion

It is clear from the finds listed in the SMR data for the parish that some activity has taken place in this area in the Romano-British period. A sherd of Romano-British greyware and a medieval potsherd have been found during fieldwalking c.100m to the west of the site, and the late Iron Age sherd recovered from pit [109] significantly broadens the date range of a potential settlement in this area. However, this pit, seen in the footings trenches for plot 1, which yielded a single sherd of late Iron Age pottery does not argue for this site to have been a focus of activity in the period.

8.0 Effectiveness of methodology

The methodology employed has allowed for the rapid and cost-effective recording of the features seen in the two house plots. A single pit was seen in the foundation trenches of Plot 1, which has yielded pottery suggesting a late Iron Age date for the pit. However, no datable artefacts were recovered from the pit exposed in Plot 3.

9.0 Acknowledgements

Pre-Construct Archaeology (Lincoln) would like to thank Brinkley Homes for this commission, and for their co-operation during the watching brief.

10.0 References

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Van de Noort, R., and Ellis, S., (eds.), 1997, *Wetland Heritage of the Humberhead Levels: an archaeological survey*. The Humber Wetlands Project, University of Hull.

Williams, A. and Martin, G. H. (eds.), 1992, *Domesday Book: A Complete Translation*. Penguin Books, London.

11.0 Site archive

The documentary archive for the site is currently in the possession of Pre-Construct Archaeology. This will be deposited with North Lincolnshire Museum within six months from the completion of the project.