PROGRAMME OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK AT MILL ROAD/TIMBER LANE, STOURPORT, WORCESTERSHIRE

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Project 2344
Report 1154
WSM 32262

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Background information

Planning background

Client	Laing Homes Midlands
Site address	Mill Road, Stourport, Worcestershire DY13 9BJ
National Grid Reference	SO 82057167
Sites and Monuments Record reference	WSM 32262
Planning authority reference	Wyre Forest District Council WF/0472/98
Brief	AS 2002
Project design	AS 2003
Project parameters	IFA 1999

Geographical, archaeological and historical background

The development area is centred upon the junction of Mill Road with Timber Lane which lies approximately 1km to the east of Stourport town centre (Fig 1). In terms of its geology, topography and soils, the area lies on the relatively level floodplain of the Stour where Holocene river terrace deposits have given rise to deep loamy soils (Geological Survey of Great Britain 1976; Soil Survey of England and Wales 1983).

The archaeological and historical background of the area, and the archaeological implications of the proposed development have been considered in a previous desk-based assessment (John Samuels 2000) and summarised in an Impact Statement and Review (EC Harris 2002). In summary, evidence from the locality suggested that the floodplain and its margins were used as hunting grounds throughout early prehistory, while the documentary context for the medieval and post-medieval periods suggested a low level of agricultural activity in the area. Modern land-use is represented above-ground by houses, gardens and railway embankments, and by buried deposits resulting from dumped and landscaped industrial waste.

On the basis of these reports, the Brief identified a potential for Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age remains in areas that had not been disturbed by modern landscaping, and for waterlogged plant and insect remains in an area adjacent to the river. In terms of fieldwork, the Brief required trenching in a parcel of land defined by Timber Lane and two railway embankments in the north-west of the area, and the excavation of a single test pit in the lower part of a field on the riverbank towards the east (Fig 2). The rest of the area was excluded from the scope of the project because of the likelihood that landscaping had removed or reworked earlier deposits.

Aims

The general aim of a programme of archaeological work is to establish the presence (or absence) and significance of archaeological deposits, and to report on the results in a way that informs planning decisions, and contributes to local, regional and national research frameworks. The present project aimed to do this for the two areas identified above by means of an SMR assessment, a walkover survey, trenching and environmental sampling.

Methods

General specification	CAS 1995
Sources consulted	SMR; John Samuels 2000; EC Harris 2002
Dates of fieldwork	11th to 17th February 2003
Area of deposits observed	*c* 500m² Indicated on Table 1

Trench number	Length	Width	Depth
Trench 1	98.00m	2.00m	0.70m
Trench 2	71.00m	2.00m	0.56m
Trench 3	48.00m	2.00m	0.70m
Trench 4	20.00m	2.00m	0.80m
Trench 5	11.50m	2.00m	0.85m
Trench 6	1.70m	1.50m	1.85m

Table 1: Maximum dimensions of trenches

Access to and visibility of deposits

Observation took place after machine excavation. The limited depth and stable sides of the trenches allowed full and safe access for the purposes of observation and recording. The exposed surfaces were sufficiently clean to observe well differentiated soil horizons, and selected profiles were cleaned to allow closer examination. Drawn, written and photographic records were compiled according to standard Service practice (CAS 1995). In addition, the excavated spoil mounded alongside the trenches was scanned for artefacts.

Statement of confidence in methods and results

In general, access to, and visibility of exposed surfaces were sufficient to allow an accurate record of the exposed surfaces to be made, and for reliable conclusions to be drawn from the evidence. In addition, enough of the excavated spoil was accessible to allow a reasonable assessment of the quantity of material in the topsoil and subsoil. Accordingly, a high degree of confidence can be attached to the results of the project.

Deposit descriptions

Context	Description	Interpretation	Depth
100, 200, 300 etc	Grass and root mat (D: 0.16m) over soft greyish brown sandy loam; common fine roots and few small gravels; blocky structure; clear lower boundary	Turf and topsoil	0.26-0.40m
101, 201, 301 etc	Friable light reddish/yellowish brown fine sand; few medium roots penetrating from horizon above; stoneless, structureless; diffuse lower boundary	Biologically reworked subsoil	0.26-0.50m
102, 202, 302etc	Light reddish brown/brownish red clay sand; few small gravels and medium to large pockets of finer material	Parent material (drift)	0.50m+

Table 2: Generalised descriptions of deposits in Trenches 1-5

Context	Description	Interpretation	Depth below ground level
600	Dense reeds, thorns, and common young alder and birch over soft mid greyish brown clay loam; few small gravels and fine to medium roots; weak blocky structure, clear lower boundary	Vegetation and topsoil	0-0.10m
601	Firm to compact mid brown, grey and reddish brown sandy clay/sandy clay loam; few small to medium gravels, brick fragments, sherds of pottery and glass; structureless; sharp lower boundary	Made ground	0.10-1.10m
602	Compact mid blueish grey clay (reduced) with few medium roots (oxidised around channel); several brick fragments recovered from lower part of deposit	Waterlogged and clay enriched made ground	1.10-1.60m
603	Grass and root mat over compact dark greyish brown silt loam; stoneless; clear lower boundary; several brick fragments recovered from lower part of deposit	Buried grass and topsoil	1.60-1.65m
604	Compact light olive sandy clay with common medium to large rounded stones; one brick fragment recovered	Buried subsoil	1.65-1.85m+

Table 3: Description of deposits in Trench 6

Results

Trenches 1-5

Five trenches were excavated in the field to the west of Timber Lane, in the angle of two disused railway embankments (Fig 3). These were located in such a way as to establish the extent of any archaeological deposits in the field, target any earthworks, and avoid known services (especially a high-voltage electricity cable). The trenches were excavated in shallow spits down to the interface between the reworked subsoil and parent material, in order to expose any features (ditches, pits, etc) cut into the these deposits from former topsoil horizons.

Despite careful excavation, good conditions of access and visibility, and selective cleaning of deposits, no archaeological remains of any kind were identified in any of the five trenches. The sequence of deposits in each case comprised a biologically-reworked clay loam topsoil overlying a less reworked and sandier subsoil, which in turn overlay coarse sandy clay with varying proportions of fine sand and small gravels (Plate 1). The latter deposit had been disturbed in antiquity by trees, which were represented by irregular patches of darker soil, although the upper part of the profile did not appear to have been disturbed by anything other than shallow-rooted plants. Significantly, there was no evidence of ancient or recent ploughing in the form of soil attributes or artefacts incorporated by manuring with midden material. No artefacts whatever were recovered from Trenches 1 and 4, while those recovered from the topsoil in Trench 2 were of 20th century date, and are considered to have weathered from the adjacent railway embankment (which was built, according to map evidence and local knowledge, in the 1940s).

The deposits in Trench 5 provided an exception to the rule, in that they reflected the same landscaping that had been noted from ground investigations in the field to the east. A slight hollow in this area proved to be a modern truncation, that had been only partially levelled up with dumped

material including fragments of metal, glass and leather (none of which were handled or collected, due to the likelihood of their being contaminated, and their clearly modern date).

Apart from the trenches in this field, some mention should be made of the old hawthorn hedgerow running along the northern boundary of the fence, which, although long neglected, and at once gappy and overgrown, is a good example of a traditional Midlands laid hedge. In view of the apparent age of the trees, and the evidence of several 19th century maps (EC Harris 2002, appendix 2; Tucker, Zaluckyj and Alma 1986, 25) it can be suggested that the hedge is one of the oldest in the locality, being at least as old as the railway embankment above it (built between 1838 and 1884). In addition, it is worth drawing attention to the curving line formed by Mill Road and Timber Lane, which is best shown on the Tithe Map (Anon 1838). This road is likely to represent a route around a sub-circular enclosure such as a warren or park, which almost certainly pre-dates the earliest recorded enclosure of the area in the 17th century (Tucker, Zaluckyj and Alma 1986, chapters 3c and 3d).

Trench 6

Trench 6 was hand-excavated close to one of five ground investigation test-pits in which a deposit identified as peat was found beneath 1.30-1.95m of made ground (Figure 2; EC Harris 2002, appendix 3). It was considered that this deposit might contain plant remains relating to past habitats and human activity in the locality, and the purpose of Trench 6 was to expose and sample this layer at a point where it appeared to reach its maximum thickness.

The excavation showed that the deposit was not peat in the strict sense of concentrated organic material, but merely the former grass and topsoil that had developed on the riverbank at some point during the last two centuries (Fig 4 and Plate 2). The date of the deposit was firmly established by finds of machine-made brick fragments within it and in the layer below. The lower part of the profile had indeed been substantially waterlogged, leading to the development of a thick, reduced Bt horizon, although this was also unmistakably a recent phenomenon. Given this situation, no further work was undertaken. Apart from the negative results of this trench, some mention should be made of the visible evidence for later land-use in the field. The made ground seems to have deposited and spread over a wide area above the river-bank, probably as a means of flood prevention. Also, although the field was overgrown with reeds, young alders and birches, numerous low parallel ridges on the surface suggest that the toposoil had been mounded to provide a seed-bed for hops, or another kind of orchard tree (Pitt 1813, 114-116). The landscaping would therefore appear to have been followed by a phase of horticulture, and then by a generation or so of relatively benign neglect.

Discussion

The results from the five trenches in the field to the west of Timber Lane suggest a complete absence of significant archaeological deposits. Instead, the exposed deposits suggest a stable soil profile formed in a grassland environment, and latterly affected by recent railway construction and landscaping. Associated evidence suggests that the area may have formed part of a medieval enclosure of some kind, and was latterly farmland, although it appears never to have been a particular focus of past human activity.

The results of the single trench in the field to the east of Timber Lane are of limited interest, except in confirming the recent history of land-use in this parcel. However, the exposed deposits provide an instructive demonstration of the rate of post-depositional changes in alluvial environments, which in this case can be placed within a window of less than 200 years.

Publication summary

The Service has a professional obligation to publish the results of archaeological projects within a reasonable period of time. To this end, the Service intends to use this summary as the basis for publication through local or regional journals. The client is requested to consider the content of this section as being acceptable for such publication.

A programme of archaeological work was undertaken by the Service on behalf of Laing Homes Midlands at Mill Road/Timber Lane, Stourport, Worcestershire (NGR SO 82057167; WSM 32262). Drawing on the result of previous desk-based assessments and ground investigations, the project set out to test the potential for remains of prehistoric and later activity and environmental evidence in two parts of a wider development area.

Extensive trenching in a field in the north-west of the area suggested a complete lack of archaeological remains. Rather, the near-uniform sequence of deposits exposed suggested a stable soil profile formed in a long-established grassland environment. Associated evidence suggests that the area may have formed part of a medieval or early modern enclosure, before becoming farmland, and latterly being affected by railway construction and landscaping.

A single trench excavated in a field beside the river Stour also produced largely negative results. A deposit exposed during previous ground investigations in this area had been identified as peat, and was considered to have the potential to contain significant palaeoenvironmental evidence. However, excavation demonstrated that the deposit was not peat, but merely the grassy turf which had grown on the river bank at some point in the 19th or early 20th century, and which had been directly overlain by made ground in a major landscaping event. A subsequent, short-lived phase of horticulture was represented on the surface of the field by closely-set ridges of mounded soil.

In conclusion, neither of the two areas investigated during the project contained remains of archaeological significance, and neither is likely to have been a focus of past human activity. The rest of the development area may once have contained archaeological remains, but the extent and impact of modern landscaping makes it unlikely that any have survived this disturbance.

Archive

Fieldwork progress records AS2	4
Photographic records AS3	6
Colour slides	62
Black and white photographs	61
Context finds sheets AS8	1
Trench record sheets AS41	6
Drawings	1
Computer disks	1

The project archive is intended to be placed at:

Worcestershire County Museum
Hartlebury Castle, Hartlebury
Near Kidderminster
Worcestershire DY11 7XZ
telephone 01299 250416

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