



Crown Farm Quarry, Oakmere, Cheshire

Archaeological Watching Brief



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SUMMARY

An archaeological watching brief was carried out for Tarmac Ltd in June 2008 by Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) at Crown Farm Quarry, Oakmere, Cheshire (NGR SJ 571699). The work was required as part of a planning condition (ref: 4/APP/2004/0565) to be carried out during the topsoil stripping of a 40m wide corridor in advance of extraction along the line of a projected Roman road. This followed previous archaeological investigation undertaken within the area outlined for the latest phase of extraction at the quarry. As part of the condition, a geophysical survey and programme of trial trenching had been carried out (LUAU 1991). Consequently, a subsequent watching brief (LUAU 1998) was maintained over part of the area known, as Phase 4 of the extraction. The investigation found the site to be traversed by the line of the Roman road linking the forts at Chester (*Deva*), Northwich (*Condate*) and Manchester (*Mancunium*), although it would seem that ploughing has truncated much of the remains in this area. Nevertheless, the road was seen in the trial trenching to consist of a cambered gravelled surface measuring 12.5m wide with flanking ditches.

The area subject to a watching brief during the latest phase of wider topsoil stripping observed the removal of the topsoil in the 40m corridor to a maximum depth of approximately 0.7m, wherein two features were uncovered. The first was a small square pit, **105**, that measured 1.2m by 0.62m and 0.04m deep. The second was a feature that appeared to be a ditch or gully, **107**, at the eastern end of the 40m corridor. It had irregular sides and was approximately 4.85m long, 2.1m wide and 0.55m deep. It was filled with dark grey sand (**106**), very similar to the topsoil, which suggests that it may be a natural/geological anomaly. A rubble feature was also observed, thought to be the remains of a field boundary, positioned close to the track marked on modern Ordnance Survey mapping. No finds were retrieved and no significant archaeological features were observed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OA North would like to thank John Bradshaw of Tarmac Ltd for commissioning the project, and to the quarry site staff for their logistical help on site. Thanks are also due to Mark Leah of Cheshire County Council for his information and help.

The watching brief was undertaken by Kathryn Levey, who also wrote the report. The drawings were produced by Alix Sperr and the project managed by Emily Mercer, who edited the report.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CIRCUMSTANCES OF PROJECT

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) was commissioned by Tarmac Ltd, to undertake a watching brief during the topsoil strip of the latest phase of extraction at Crown Farm Quarry, Oakmere, Cheshire (NGR SJ 571699). The work is in mitigation of the development, required in line with Condition 36 of the planning consent (planning ref 4/APP/2004/0565), which states that a programme of archaeological work is necessary. In accordance with this condition, a geophysical survey and programme of trial trenching has previously been undertaken across the extraction site (LUAU 1991) and a subsequent watching brief (LUAU 1998) over part of the area (Phase 4). The initial investigation found the site to be traversed by the line of the Roman road linking the forts at Chester (*Deva*), Northwich (*Condate*) and Manchester (*Mancunium*), although it would seem that ploughing had truncated much of the remains of the road in this area. Nevertheless, it was identified in the trial trenching as having a cambered gravelled surface measuring 12.5m wide with flanking ditches. Unfortunately, no finds were actually recovered during the trial trenching to date the road to the Roman period.
- 1.1.2 The latest phase of watching brief took place between the 27th May and the 6th June 2008. This report sets out the results of the fieldwork in the form of a short document.

1.2 SITE LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 1.2.1 The site is located in the village of Oakmere in the County of Cheshire. It is positioned immediately to the north of the A556 Chester Road and to the east of Delamere forest. The Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain extends from the Mersey Valley in the north, to the Shropshire Hills, and from the Welsh Hills in the west to the Pennines in the east (Countryside Commission 2006). It is characterised by gently rolling low-lying farmland, intercepted by sandstone ridges. The Plain was formed by Triassic sandstones and marls overlain by substantial glacial deposits, namely boulder clay with local deposits of sand and gravel. Discrete glacial hollows have encouraged the development of shallow meres that are occasionally peat filled (*ibid*).

1.3 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 1.3.1 **Prehistoric Period:** the freely drained sand and gravels of the area, formed by the late-glacial deposition, have been considered favourable for settlement and agriculture from the earliest times and represent one of the richest archaeological areas in Cheshire, especially for evidence for prehistoric activity (Leah *et al* 1997, 107). Following the retreat of the ice, dense woodland covered the landscape during the Mesolithic period. Early in the Neolithic (*c* 4000 BC) short-term clearance episodes became evident before more permanent clearance and cultivation became established in later

prehistory (LUAU 1991). Isolated finds of flintwork are, however, the only tangible record of this period. The quality of the material collected from the Oakmere area, though, sets it apart from other survey areas in the North West, and makes it clear that Oakmere was a significant location throughout the Late Neolithic-Bronze Age (Leah *et al* 1997, 150).

- 1.3.2 The Bronze Age is represented by several known burial mounds. The nearest were recorded in 1882 as being at the “*lower end of a small natural lake called Fish Pool, are the tumuli known by the name of the seven lows, undoubtedly the “VII Loos” alluded to by Leland, as the works of “men of warre”* (Ormerod 1882, 2). The most substantial remains of prehistoric activity are, however, the various later prehistoric enclosures scattered along the Mid-Cheshire Ridge (Leah *et al*, 108), such as the hillforts (at Eddisbury) located on the sandstone ridge to the west.
- 1.3.3 **Roman Period:** Roman activity is well documented within the major towns of Cheshire, although its impact seems to be minimal on the rural population. Evidence suggests that the local country population lived very much as they did in the Iron Age (*ibid*). Nevertheless, the construction of roads such as Watling Street, the main road linking London with northern Wales, would have certainly made the Roman presence felt. The projected line of a Roman road running to Chester is shown on modern Ordnance Survey (OS) mapping passing immediately to the east of the site, along the route of the A556. Therefore, there was a potential for remains to be encountered associated with the road or roadside structures.
- 1.3.4 Consequently, a programme of evaluation was undertaken following planning consent for extraction at Crown Farm Quarry with an archaeological condition. This consisted of a geophysical survey and subsequent trial trenching (LUAU 1991). This investigation found the site to be crossed by the line of the Roman road, which is likely to have been that which linked the legionary fortress and settlement at Chester (*Deva*), with the fort at Northwich (*Condate*) and then on towards Manchester (*Mancunium*). However, although it would seem that ploughing has truncated much of the road remains in this area, it was seen to consist of a cambered gravelled surface measuring 12.5m wide with flanking ditches, similar in dimension to sections of the road recorded to the east and west. This is a considerable width, and is suggestive of a significant route. Unfortunately, no finds were actually recovered during the trial trenching to date the road to the Roman period (*ibid*).
- 1.3.5 Traces of associated settlement were also possibly located, confined to an area of approximately 10m-15m to the east of the trackway (*ibid*). In mitigation of the development of the site for quarrying, a subsequent watching brief (LUAU 1998) was carried out over part of the site (Phase 4, to the west of the current watching brief area) in the vicinity of the Roman road. No significant archaeological deposits or features were recorded (*ibid*).
- 1.3.6 **Medieval Period:** there is little tangible evidence for any early medieval activity in the area. Eddisbury is thought to have been part of a network of settlements created by Aethelflaeda, daughter of King Alfred the Great, to

repel Viking attack (Fairhurst 1988). Evidence is in general limited to the large number of settlements whose place-names derive from Old English.

- 1.3.7 During the later medieval period the area formed part of the Royal Forest of Delamere. This status placed considerable restrictions on agricultural activity in the area, and heavy penalties were imposed even for digging turves (Leah *et al*, 115). During this period, however, small-scale enclosure (assarting) was undertaken on the payment of dues to meet the demand for timber (LUAU 1991).
- 1.3.8 **Post-Medieval Period:** Delamere was not finally disafforested until 1812, when the Enclosure Act was first passed, although the process was not completed until 1819 (Leah *et al*, 115) the area surrounding the proposed development was directly subject to the effects of this Enclosure Act, which resulted in large portions of the forest being auctioned off to raise money for the cost of enclosure, and the allocation of Crown lands for timber production. Four new townships were created in the enclosure awards of 1819, including Oakmere and Delamere. By 1856, the Crown allotments were deemed unsuitable for timber production and the land subsequently reverted to agriculture by the addition of marl from the Keuper marl beds to the north-west of the site (LUAU 1991).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 PROJECT DESIGN

2.1.1 A project design (*Appendix 1*) was submitted by OA North in response to a request from Tarmac Ltd, and in accordance with a verbal brief provided by the Cheshire County Council Planning Archaeologist. The project design was adhered to in full and the work was consistent with the relevant standards and procedures of the Institute of Field Archaeologists, and generally accepted best practice.

2.2 WATCHING BRIEF

2.2.1 During the topsoil stripping in advance of the latest phase of extraction at the quarry, a permanent archaeological presence was maintained over a 40m wide corridor along the projected line of the Roman road. Excavation was carried out by a 32 tonne 360° mechanical excavator fitted with a 1.6m ditching bucket, under the constant observation of an OA North archaeologist.

2.2.2 Recording was by means of OA North's standard context recording system, with trench records and supporting registers and indices. A full photographic record in monochrome format was undertaken, together with digital photographs for illustrative purposes.

2.3 ARCHIVE

2.3.1 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with the project design (*Appendix 1*), and in accordance with current IFA and English Heritage guidelines (English Heritage 1991). The paper and digital archive will be deposited in the Cheshire Record Office on completion of the project.

3. RESULTS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 The objective of the watching brief was to identify any potential archaeological features or deposits revealed during the topsoil strip, and record their presence or absence, character and extent, integrity, state of preservation and relative quality. The position of the area of watching brief is plotted on Figure 2.

3.2 FIELDWORK

3.2.1 The topsoil, **101**, was dark grey-brown clayey-sand and was 0.32m to 0.68m in depth. Above the topsoil, in the central section of the watching brief area (Fig 2) the remains of a field boundary was discovered, close to the north-west/south-east running trackway shown on modern OS mapping. This was made up of rubble and was 2.5m wide and 0.5m deep. Below the topsoil was a light-mid orange sand (**102**) with 20-40% inclusions of rounded stones.

3.2.2 Only two features were uncovered during the watching brief; a small pit to the east of centre within the watching brief strip, and a possible ditch or gully at the eastern edge of the site. The pit (**105**) was filled with orange sand (**103**), similar to the natural sand around it, and a dark grey clay (**104**). It was a rectangular feature measuring 0.62m wide by 1.2m in length, and 0.04m deep. No dating evidence was uncovered, but its shallow depth may suggest that an agricultural origin. The ditch (**107**) had irregular sides but was approximately 4.85m long, 2.1m wide and 0.55m deep. It was filled with dark grey sand (**106**), very similar to the topsoil, which suggests that it may be a natural/geological anomaly.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 DISCUSSION

- 4.1.1 The stripping of the 40m wide corridor under permanent archaeological presence revealed no evidence of the anticipated Roman road or associated features. No artefacts were found and the only remains uncovered belonged to a rubble field boundary, and two negative features.
- 4.1.2 The two features that were uncovered, a pit (*105*) and a ditch or gully (*107*), provided no dating evidence and appeared to be unrelated. The sides of each feature were irregular and they were very shallow. This suggests that they were more likely to be natural features, or the result of agricultural land use rather than any significant archaeological features.

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6. ILLUSTRATIONS

6.1 LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1: General view of topsoil strip, facing south-west

Plate 2: North-facing section through ditch *107*

6.2 LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Site location

Figure 2: Area of watching brief



Plate 1: General view of topsoil strip, facing south-west



Plate 2: North-facing section through ditch **107**

APPENDIX 1: PROJECT DESIGN

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

1.1.1 Tarmac Ltd (hereafter the client) has requested Oxford Archaeology North (OA North) submit proposals to undertake an archaeological watching brief for the purposes of the next phase of topsoil stripping prior to extraction at Crown Farm Quarry, Oakmere, Cheshire (NGR SJ 571699). This work is required in line with Condition 36 of the planning consent (Ref 4/APP/2004/0565), which states that a programme of archaeological work is necessary. In accordance with this condition, a geophysical survey and programme of trial trenching has previously been undertaken over the area outlined for extraction (LUAU 1991) and a subsequent watching brief (LUAU 1998) over part of the area (Phase 4). The assessment found the site to be traversed by the line of the Roman road linking the forts at Chester (*Deva*), Northwich (*Condate*) and Manchester (*Mancunium*), although it would seem that ploughing has truncated much of the remains in this area. Nevertheless, the road was seen to consist of a cambered gravelled surface measuring 12.5m wide with flanking ditches. Unfortunately, no finds were actually recovered during the trial trenching to date the road to the Roman period.

1.1.2 Due to the high archaeological potential within the extraction area, a permanent presence archaeological watching brief is required along a 40m wide corridor over the line of the road.

1.2 OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGY NORTH

1.2.1 Oxford Archaeology North has considerable experience of excavation of sites of all periods, having undertaken a great number of small and large-scale projects throughout Northern England during the past 30 years. Evaluations, assessments, watching briefs and excavations have taken place within the planning process and according to any statutory constraints, to fulfil the requirements of clients and planning authorities, to very rigorous timetables.

1.2.2 OA North has the professional expertise and resources to undertake the project detailed below to a high level of quality and efficiency. OA North is **an Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA) registered organisation, registration number 17**, and all its members of staff operate subject to the IFA Code of Conduct.

2 OBJECTIVES

2.1 The following programme has been designed to identify any surviving archaeological deposits or features and provide for accurate recording of any archaeological remains that are disturbed during the groundworks.

2.2 *Watching brief:* to carry out a permanent presence watching brief during the topsoil stripping in advance of extraction within the 40m wide corridor along the route of the probable Roman road, to determine the quality, extent and importance of any archaeological remains on the site.

2.3 *Report and Archive:* a report will be produced for the client within eight weeks of completion of the fieldwork. A site archive will be produced to English Heritage guidelines (MAP 2) and in accordance with the *Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long Term Storage* (UKIC 1990).

3 METHOD STATEMENT

3.1 HEALTH AND SAFETY

3.1.1 OA North provides a Health and Safety Statement for all projects and maintains a Unit Safety policy. All site procedures are in accordance with the guidance set out in the Health and Safety Manual compiled by the Standing Conference of Archaeological Unit Managers (1997). OA North will liaise with the client to ensure all health and safety regulations are met. A risk assessment will be completed in advance of any on-site works. It is assumed that any information regarding health and safety issues on site will be made available by the client to OA North prior to the work commencing on site.

3.2 WATCHING BRIEF

- 3.2.1 **Methodology:** a programme of field observation will accurately record the location, extent, and character of any surviving archaeological features and/or deposits within the proposed ground disturbance. This work will comprise observation during the groundworks, the systematic examination of any subsoil horizons exposed, and the accurate recording of all archaeological features and horizons, and any artefacts, identified during observation. The watching brief will be maintained during the topsoil stripping within the outlined area.
- 3.2.2 Putative archaeological features and/or deposits identified, together with the immediate vicinity of any such features, will be cleaned by hand using trowels and, where appropriate, sections will be studied and drawn. Any such features will be sample excavated (ie. selected pits and postholes will normally only be half-sectioned, linear features will be subject to no more than a 10% sample, and extensive layers will, where possible, be sampled by partial rather than complete removal).
- 3.2.3 During this phase of work, recording will comprise a full description and preliminary classification of features or materials revealed, and their accurate location (either on plan and/or section, and as grid co-ordinates where appropriate). Features will be planned accurately at appropriate scales and annotated on to a large-scale plan provided by the client.
- 3.2.4 A photographic record will be undertaken simultaneously of features and finds, and of general working shots. This will entail monochrome contact prints with replica digital photographs for presentation purposes.
- 3.2.5 A plan will be produced of the areas of groundworks showing the location and extent of the ground disturbance and one or more dimensioned sections will be produced, where appropriate.
- 3.2.6 **Contingency plan:** in the event of significant archaeological features being encountered during the watching brief, discussions will take place with English Heritage, as to the extent of further works to be carried out. All further works would be subject to a variation to this project design. In the event of environmental/organic deposits being present on site, it would be necessary to discuss and agree a programme of palaeoenvironmental sampling and/or dating with English Heritage.

3.3 ARCHIVE/REPORT

- 3.3.1 **Archive:** the results of all archaeological work carried out will form the basis for a full archive to professional standards, in accordance with current English Heritage guidelines (*Management of Archaeological Projects*, 2nd edition, 1991). This archive will be provided in the English Heritage Centre for Archaeology format and a synthesis will be submitted to the Cheshire HER (the index to the archive and a copy of the report). OA North practice is to deposit the original record archive of projects (paper, magnetic and plastic media) with the County Record Office, and a full copy of the record archive (microform or microfiche) together with the material archive (artefacts, ecofacts, and samples) with an appropriate museum.
- 3.3.2 **Report:** one bound copy and one unbound copy of a written synthetic report will be submitted to the client, together with a copy to the Planning Archaeologist and HER. Any finds recovered will be assessed with reference to other local material and any particular or unusual features of the assemblage will be highlighted. The report will also include a complete bibliography of sources from which data has been derived.
- 3.3.3 **Confidentiality:** all internal reports to the client are designed as documents for the specific use of the Client, for the particular purpose as defined in the project brief and project design, and should be treated as such. They are not suitable for publication as academic documents or otherwise without amendment or revision.

4 OTHER MATTERS

4.1 PROJECT MONITORING

- 4.1.1 Whilst the work is undertaken for the client, monitoring of this project will be undertaken by the Planning Archaeologist for Cheshire.

4.2 WORK TIMETABLE

- 4.2.1 The duration of the archaeological presence for the watching brief will be dictated by the client's schedule of groundworks.
- 4.2.2 The client report will be completed within approximately eight weeks following completion of the fieldwork.

4.3 STAFFING

- 4.3.1 The project will be under the direct management of **Emily Mercer BA (Hons) MSc AIFA** (OA North Senior Project Manager) to whom all correspondence should be addressed.
- 4.3.2 The watching brief and any subsequent excavation will be supervised in the field by an OA North project supervisor.
- 4.3.3 Assessment of the finds from the evaluation will be undertaken under the auspices of OA North's in-house finds specialist **Chris Howard-Davis** (OA North project officer). Chris acts as OA North's in-house finds specialist and has extensive knowledge of all finds of all periods from archaeological sites in northern England.

4.4 INSURANCE

- 4.4.1 OA North has a professional indemnity cover to a value of £2,000,000; proof of which can be supplied as required.

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APPENDIX 2: CONTEXT INDEX

| Context | Description |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| 101 | Topsoil |
| 102 | Natural sand |
| 103 | Sand fill of 105 |
| 104 | Clay fill of 105 |
| 105 | Cut of small pit |
| 106 | Fill of 107 |
| 107 | Cut of ditch or natural hollow |