IRTHLINGBOROUGH (NH)

North East Irthlingborough
Northamptonshire

SP 957 707

Archaeological Assessment

Oxford Archaeological Unit
August 1990

INTRODUCTION

The N half of the area covered by this planning application was assessed for archaeological impact by The Oxford Archaeological Unit in 1989. A concentration of possibly early prehistoric activity was identified. The S half of the area, not investigated in 1989, forms the subject of this assessment report.

The principal geographical features are the Nene river and navigation, with subsidiary channels and dried-up beds, and the disused railway which defines the SE boundary of the application. With the exception of the railway embankment, the ground is a low-lying flood plain. The area lies mostly in Irthlingborough parish, though a small part at the extreme S end falls within Stanwick parish. The site code IRNE 90 (IRthlingborough NEne 1990) was adopted.

The adjacent field to the E, ARC Extraction Phase 2, is currently under excavation by The Oxford Archaeological Unit. A Roman villa has been found at the boundary between the two areas, and an associated farmstead and field system extend, south-eastwards from the villa. The villa is especially well-preserved, but medieval ridge-and-furrow cultivation has truncated elements of the farmstead.

ASSESSMENT STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

The assessment had two principal aims: - firstly, to establish whether villa buildings continued to the NW; and secondly to determine whether the road which is presumed to give access to the villa from the valley-side road continued towards the river Nene and, if so, whether a bridging structure survived. A secondary aim was to establish the presence/absence of other archaeological activity, including ridge-and-furrow cultivation.

A 360° mechanical excavator was used to cut eight trenches, each two metres wide (Fig. 1). Trench 1 was immediately adjacent to the villa and lay across the railway embankment. Trenches 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8 lay on the flood plain, immediately to the NW of the embankment. Trench 6 lay alongside the junction of the river Nene and Nene navigation. Trench 5 was in the middle of the area, between Trenches 3 and 6. In all cases, excavation went at least as far as the water table, and Trenches 1, 2, 5 and 6 were bottomed onto gravel. Trench sides were unstable in all exposures. Table 1 gives full trench dimensions and excavation depths. The work was funded by ARC Eastern, and took place from 21 - 27 July 1990.

TRENCH	LENGTH	MAX DEPTH	EXPOSED TO
1	20 m	3.5 m	Gravel in centre of trench
2	26 m	2.4 m	Gravel at NE end
3	30 m	1.7 m	0.2 m below water influx
4	20 m	1.7 m	0.2 m below water influx
5	10 m	2.1 m	Gravel
6	30 m	2.0 m	Gravel
7	20 m	1.1 m	0.1 m below water influx
8	20 m	1.5 m	0.1 m below water influx

Table 1: Summary data of assessment trenches, IRNE 90

RESULTS

Trench 1

The uppermost 1.35 - 1.45 m of the trench consisted of make-up layers for the railway and three drains also associated with it. Below this was a layer of alluvial clay up to 1.4 m thick, bottoming onto natural sand; the latter was 0.5 m thick onto gravel. At the E end of the trench the alluvial clay was cut by a palaeochannel whose E side lay beyond the limits of excavation. The W edge of the channel appeared to have moved eastwards at an unidentified date.

Trenches 2 - 8

The depositional sequences in these trenches did not vary significantly. In all exposures topsoil was approximately 0.3 m deep, consisting of a very clayey matrix which broke up into 10 cm-square (average) lumps. Immediately below the topsoil, and extending down to gravel in most trenches, was an alluvial clay matrix. The only distinguishing features within this were a pronounced gleying from the water-table downwards (i.e. 1.5 m below the surface in all trenches bar 7), and the presence of fresh-water snails (identified by Gill Campbell of the Environmental Laboratory, Oxford University Museum) in profusion in Trench 5, and with a lower frequency in trenches 6 and 8. Trench 5 contained a 20 cm-thick layer of sand between the alluvial clay and natural gravel. No archaeological features of any sort were present, and the only finds were sherds of 19th - and - 20th century ceramics (not retained) from the topsoil in Trenches 2 - 4.

DISCUSSION

It was evident from Trenches 2 - 8 that the entire field was fully alluviated. The presence of freshwater snails in several trenches is indicative of major water action, though whether from semi-permanent flooding or an earlier river course could not be determined. It was clear, however, that no Roman road crossed the assessment area. This is not surprising giving the evident waterlogging of the ground over a prolonged period.

While Trench 1 did not contain pre-modern archaeological features it did provide evidence regarding the ancient landscape. The palaeochannel at the E end of the trench clearly represented the boundary between the Nene floodplain and a gravel-and-sand island upon which the Roman villa was built. The latter, therefore, cannot extend far to the W of the area currently being excavated. While no dating evidence was forthcoming from the channel, it seems reasonable to suggest that it was in existence in Roman times. It would be important to define its full course, and especially whether it joins up with the channel which runs to the E of the villa. This should be seen as a priority for any further archaeological work.

The evidence from Trench 1 and the current excavations suggests that the water table was lower in Roman than medieval times. The villa was built at the edge of the contemporary flood plain, but this boundary had evidently moved approximately 60 m to the SE by the time that ridge-and-furrow cultivation was established. The current excavations have revealed the boundary of the latter some 30 m E of the villa.

CONCLUSION

The assessment produced a minimal level of archaeological activity. While it is impossible to be certain that this reflects the position in the entire area, it is clear that the archaeological potential is low. The only exception to this lies along the SE boundary, where the railway embankment masks a palaeochannel which should be further investigated to define its exact relationship with the Roman villa.

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