

# Excavations at Thatcham Northern Distributor Road, Berkshire

*By Simon Mortimer*

OAU Occasional Paper Number 3

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The excavation largely confirmed the results of previous fieldwork. The bulk of the features identified were east-west oriented ditches, containing very few artefacts. Those that contained pottery appeared to have been filled in during, or after, the 2nd century AD. Three large pits were excavated and the depth of two suggested that they might have been wells, also of Roman date. Although it has been suggested that the Roman road from Silchester to Caerleon lay to the north of the modern A4 (Bath Road), no evidence was recovered to support this assertion.

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*with contributions from Paul Booth, Theresa Durden and Ruth Pelling*

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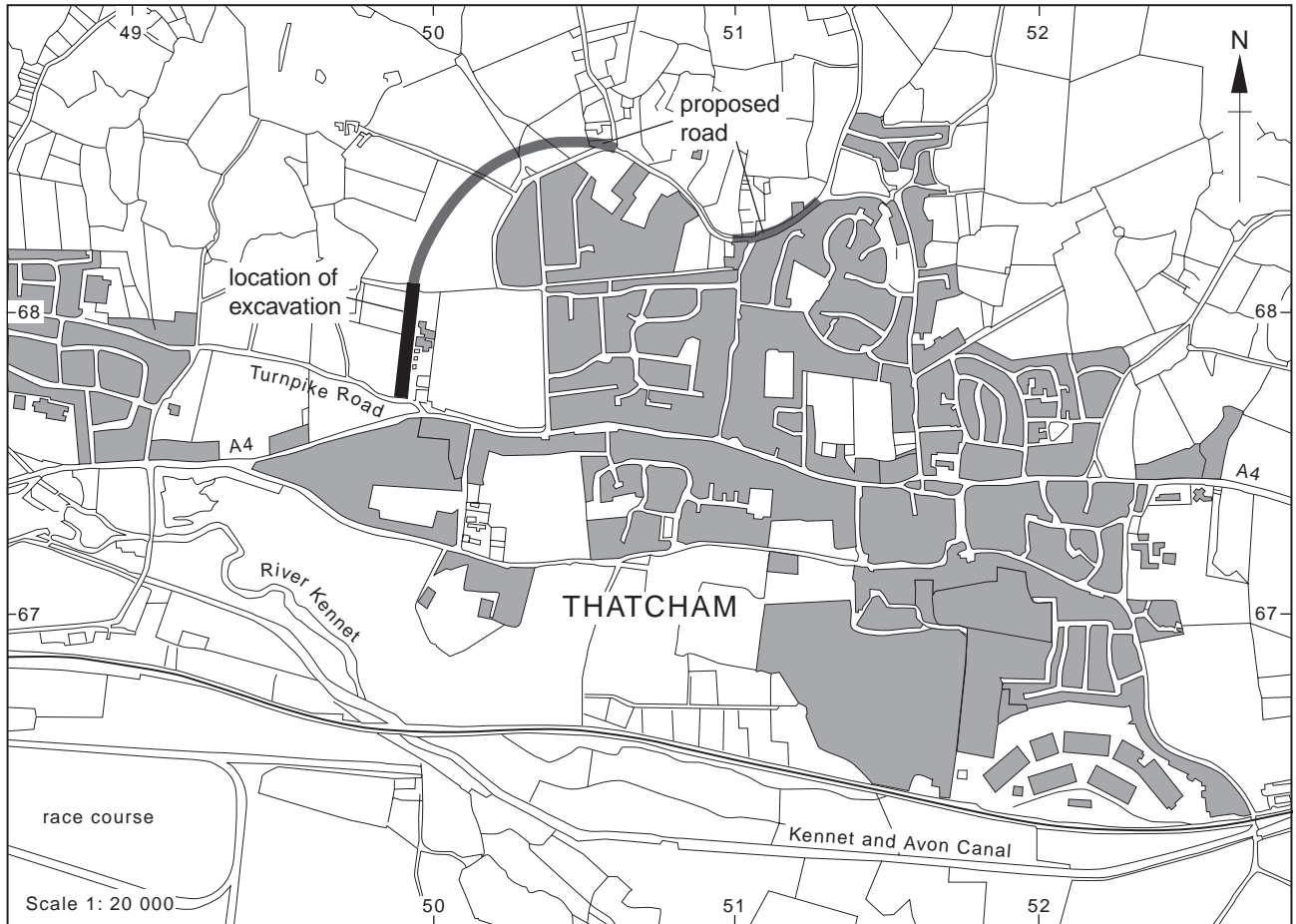
## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **LOCATION OF THE ARCHIVE**

The archive is currently held by the Oxford Archaeological Unit. The archive from the desk-based assessment, field evaluation and archaeogeophysical survey undertaken by the Babtie Group Ltd will be incorporated with the excavation archive and will be deposited with the West Berkshire Museum.

*Excavations at Thatcham Northern Distributor Road, Berkshire*



*Figure 1 Location plan*

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## SUMMARY

In the summer of 1997 the Oxford Archaeological Unit excavated an area of approximately 285 by 18 metres (5130 m<sup>2</sup>), within the corridor of the proposed Thatcham Northern Distributor road, located to the west of the town of Thatcham. This work was carried out on behalf of Berkshire County Council. The Babtie Group Ltd had undertaken a desk-based assessment and field evaluation of the archaeological potential of the route in the winter of 1996–7 and the Bartlett-Clark Consultancy had carried out an archaeogeophysical survey.

The excavation largely confirmed the results of the previous fieldwork. The bulk of the features identified were east-west oriented ditches, containing very few artefacts. Those that contained pottery appeared to have been filled in during, or after, the 2nd century AD. Three large pits were excavated and the depth of two suggested that they might have been wells, also of Roman date. Although it has been suggested that the Roman road from Silchester to Caerleon lay to the north of the modern A4 (Bath Road), no evidence was recovered to support this assertion.

## INTRODUCTION

### Location and geology (Fig. 1)

The probable Roman town of Thatcham lies approximately three kilometres to the east of modern Newbury in West Berkshire. The land to be impacted upon by the proposed Thatcham Northern Distributor Road is situated on the north-west side of the town, between Turnpike Road and Cold Ash Hill. The excavation was conducted on a south-facing slope of the River Kennet valley, 300 m to the north of Turnpike Road (SU 499 677) rising from 92.6 m OD to 98.3 m OD. At the time of fieldwork, the land-use consisted of improved arable land. The underlying geology consists predominantly of Reading Beds, with a band of Valley gravels crossing the approximate centre of the excavation area.

### Archaeological background

The most recent excavations in Thatcham, at Chamberhouse Farm (J Lewis pers. comm.; Wessex Archaeology in prep) and at Henwick Lane (Ford 1992), revealed Roman deposits and many artefacts. At Chamberhouse Farm, on the Kennet floodplain, a number of Romano-British ditches and a substantial waterlogged feature, thought to be a pond, were identified.

The Berkshire Sites and Monuments Record catalogues a substantial amount of prehistoric material from the Thatcham area, ranging from Mesolithic flint artefacts to Iron Age coins and pottery.

Margary (1973, 130–2) records the efforts to locate the Roman road connecting Calleva (Silchester) to Isca (Caerleon). The road can be traced through Aldermaston Park to Thatcham, crossing the Kennet near the Colthrop paper mill. In the 1920s and 1930s considerable evidence was found for Roman settlement to the north and south of the modern Bath Road, west of the medieval town centre. Margary argues (1973, 130–2) that it is probable that the road continued to Speen along the course of Shaw Lane, but this is not proven.

King Edgar was granted land in Thatcham in AD 971 and Astill (1978) has used the evidence of Domesday Book to argue that Thatcham was a late Saxon administrative centre, which became the centre of a royal estate and a Domesday hundred. It may have had a minster church, possibly upon the same site as the parish church, which dates from at least the 13th century. However, there is no material evidence for the Saxon settlement. Thatcham expanded in the medieval period, with a market in the 12th century and a fair in the 13th century. It has been suggested that a deserted medieval village was centred upon Henwick Manor, although there are no traces of it on the ground, or in aerial photographs.

### Background to the excavation (Fig. 2)

A desk-based assessment and field evaluation of the area to be impacted upon by the Northern Distributor road was undertaken by the Babtie Group Ltd, in the winter of 1996–7, on behalf of Berkshire County Council (Babtie Group 1997). No archaeological features were identified, although findspots in the vicinity of the proposed road corridor suggested that there was potential for prehistoric settlement of the valley slopes. It was also thought possible, from the desk-based assessment, that the newly built section of the Northern Distributor Road would cross the projected line of the Roman road connecting Silchester to Caerleon. In addition it was anticipated that evidence for a possible deserted medieval village centred upon Henwick Manor might be encountered, along with several landscape boundaries and two historic hedgerows at Lower Henwick Farm and the Bowling Green.

An archaeogeophysical survey of the proposed route of the Northern Distributor road was commissioned by the Babtie Group Ltd. Detailed magnetometer surveys, supplemented by magnetic susceptibility measurements of topsoil samples, were carried out by the Bartlett-Clark Consultancy in December 1996.



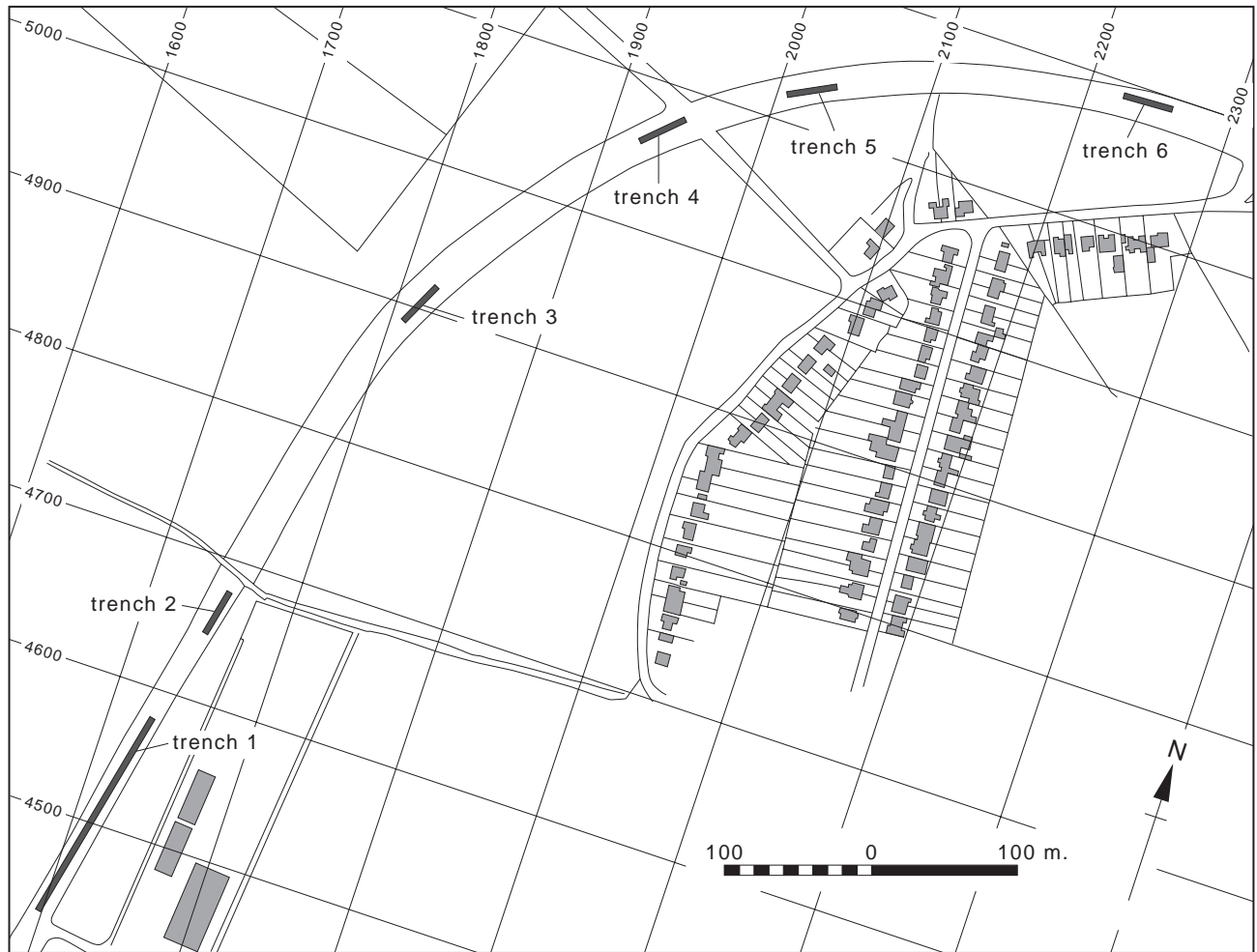


Figure 2 Location of the Babbie evaluation trenches

The magnetometer surveys suggested that the archaeological potential was high only in the area closest to Turnpike Road.

An evaluation was conducted by the Babbie Group Ltd from December 1996 to January 1997, and only trenches 1 and 2, within c. 300 m of Turnpike Road, contained archaeological features, confirming the results of the archaeogeophysical survey. Some of the features appeared to be late Roman land boundaries. It was suggested that tile recovered from these ditches may have been indicative of Roman occupation in the vicinity. No evidence was found for the Roman road between Silchester and Caerleon. However, a 60 m baulk around government oil pipelines was not excavated and it was suggested that this may have concealed evidence for the road. No evidence for the possible deserted medieval village was found, nor for a linear cropmark associated with a boundary on the 1842 tithe map.

The presence of Romano-British occupation activity (ditches, a pit and several postholes), possibly associated with the Roman road, formed the basis of the recommendation that an archaeological excavation should be conducted in the area c. 300 m north of

Turnpike Road, roughly corresponding to evaluation trenches 1 and 2.

#### Excavation methodology

The surveyor for Babbie Group Ltd, Peter Coffield, marked out the line of the proposed road corridor. The excavation was conducted within the corridor by a 360° mechanical excavator with a 1.2-m wide ditching bucket. The natural, Reading Beds and gravel, was reached at an average depth of 0.30 m. All archaeological features were excavated by hand and a single context recording system was used, thus each cut, layer and fill was assigned a single number from a continuous sequence. At least 25% of the length of all ditches encountered was excavated; all pits were half-sectioned and all stratigraphic relationships between features were examined. Each feature or deposit was planned, photographed and its section drawn. In the area south of the bridleway and north of the northernmost oil pipeline, the evaluation report recorded the fact that the features identified in this area were cut through the subsoil. After repeated cleaning and weathering, a number of indistinct ditches were identified, although

they were extremely difficult to trace in plan. Greg Campbell of the Oxford Archaeological Unit visited the site to advise upon an appropriate environmental sampling policy for the excavations. It was agreed that preservation of environmental material was generally poor and that only pits should be sampled.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION (Figs 3 and 4)

In the following description the group numbers given to the features during the excavation are followed, where appropriate, by the number assigned to the feature by the Babbie Group Ltd during the evaluation. All cut numbers referred to in the text are group feature numbers, although the illustrated sections include both the group feature and individual segment numbers.

#### Natural features

Solution hole 27 (Babbie 107) was located 20 m south of the bridleway. It was sub-circular in plan, c.3 m wide and was excavated to a depth of 1.8 m without reaching the base. The edges of the feature were very ill defined, as were the individual silty fills, which appeared to grade into the natural. There was a lens of charcoal, 0.80 m below the topsoil, suggesting that the feature may have been in use while a partially silted hollow.

#### Ditches 164, 165

Two ditches containing prehistoric material (164, 165) were located in the southernmost 70 m of the excavation area. They were both oriented north-east to south-west. Ditch 164 (Babbie 27) was exposed for a length of approximately 40 m and three sections were excavated through it. It measured between 1.84 m and 2.30 m wide and varied in depth between 0.38 m and 0.60 m. The ditch had a flat base and fairly gently sloping sides and contained three sandy silt fills (96, 129, 134). Three flint flakes, broadly dated to the later Neolithic/ early Bronze Age, were recovered from fill 96.

Ditch 165 (Babbie 33) was observed for 23 m from the western baulk before becoming obscured north of the section excavated to examine ditches 167 and 169. It was fairly steep-sided and measured between 0.6 m and 0.78 m wide with a maximum depth of 0.13 m. It was filled with dark brown silty sand (94, 153) and contained two small abraded sherds of Bronze Age or Iron Age pottery.

On balance it appears possible that ditches 164 and 165 were post-medieval in date. Ditch 167 to the south-east of ditch 165 was on the same alignment as ditches 164 and 165 and it also contained prehistoric material. However, ditch 167 also contained 11 fragments of post-medieval tile, illustrating the potential for contamination with residual prehistoric material.

#### Roman ditches

Ditch 147 (Babbie 4) was located c. 33 m north of the southern baulk. It was observed for 12.7 m from the western baulk before disappearing at the point where

a section was excavated to examine the profiles of ditches 166, 147 and 168. It had a maximum width of 0.7 m and depth of 0.08 m with a shallow concave profile. It was filled with dark yellow brown silty sand (148), from which nineteen sherds from a single New Forest Beaker, dated 270–400 AD, were recovered (Fig. 5).

Ditch 19 (Babbie 42) was located 37 m south of the southernmost pipeline where it crossed the full width of the excavation area. It was 1 m wide and 0.5–0.58 m deep, with a 'V-shaped' profile (Fig. 4.2) and contained two grey brown sandy silt fills (20, 21). Three sherds of pottery dated to the 2nd century AD or later and six sherds of pottery dated to the 3rd century AD or later were found in the ditch in association with eight fragments of Roman tile.

Ditch 143 (Babbie 108, 109, 110) was found 22 m north of the northernmost pipeline. It was oriented east-west and was 1–1.3 m wide and between 0.42 m and 0.56 m deep, with two silty sand fills. Fourteen sherds of pottery dated to the 2nd century AD or later and six sherds dated to the late 1st to 2nd century AD were found in the ditch along with twenty fragments of Roman tile.

Ditch 132 (Babbie 121) was found 15 m north of ditch 143 and was also aligned east-west. It measured 1.3 m in width and 0.60 m in depth, with a V-shaped profile (Fig. 4.3). The ditch had a maximum of five fills and a single sherd of pottery dated to the 2nd century AD or later was found within the ditch. The ditch was cut by post-medieval ditch 111.

Ditch 161 was located 5 m south of the southernmost pipeline and survived only as an ephemeral feature. It was visible for 8 m from the western baulk and its eastern terminal was removed by Roman well 46. Against the western baulk it was 0.8 m wide and 0.20 m deep. At its eastern extent it was spread, probably by ploughing, to a width of 4.8 m and it had been reduced in depth to 0.07 m. It was filled with dark brown silt (64, 82) with a large amount of flint gravel inclusions. The ditch cut tree-throw hole 85, demonstrating that the area was cleared prior to the cutting of the ditch. The stratigraphic relationship of the ditch to the well would indicate that 161 was of Roman or earlier date.

#### Probable Roman wells

Two probable wells were found within 20 m of the southernmost pipeline. Feature 46 was sub-circular in plan, with a diameter of 2.82 m. It was excavated to a depth of 1.8 m and augured to a further 1.2 m, without encountering the bottom. The excavated deposits within the well (44, 45, 53 and 54) were all clay silts with the exception of the basal fill (54) which was a sandy silt. The percentage of gravel inclusions decreased with increasing depth, suggesting that it may have stood open and filled naturally, with increasing weathering of the sides. Nine sherds of pottery dating to the 2nd century AD or later and four fragments of Roman tile were found within the well.

Feature 55 (Babbie 23) was ovoid in plan and measured 3.4 m north-south by 2.83 m east-west. It was

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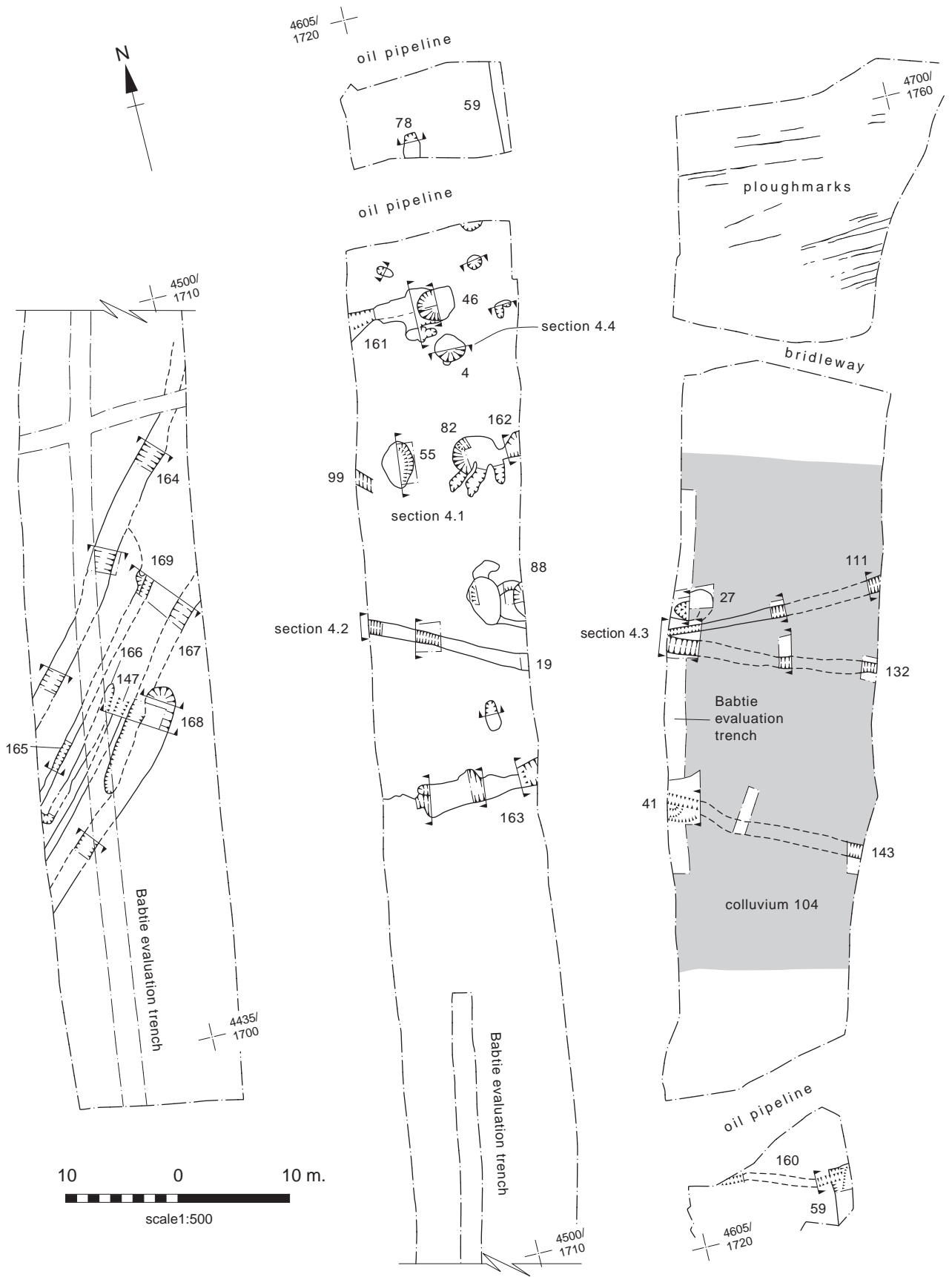


Figure 3 Trench plan

excavated to a depth of 1.9 m and augured to a further 1.05 m without encountering the base. The sides of the well had slumped giving it an undercut profile (Fig. 4.1). It was filled with dark brown silt (56) which contained a lens of charcoal. Six sherds of pottery dated to the 2nd century AD or later were recovered from the feature.

#### **Possible medieval ditch**

Ditch 41 was located 27 m north of the northernmost pipeline and measured 0.7 m in width and 0.27 m in depth. It was filled with dark brown silty sand (42) which contained a sherd of late medieval glazed pottery. Ditch 41 cut Roman ditch 143.

#### **Post-medieval ditches**

Ditch 168 (Babtie 44) was the southernmost ditch. It extended for 23 m from the western baulk before terminating 3 m short of the eastern baulk. The ditch was an average of 1.5 m in width and 0.26 m in depth, although it widened to 2.6 m and deepened to 0.62 m at the terminal. The base of the ditch was flat, and the sides were straight and steep. The ditch terminal had three fills (136/139/140); two clay layers overlain by a layer of light grey brown silty sand (150) which was the sole fill of the remainder of the ditch. Ditch 168 cut ditch 167, which was post-medieval in date.

Ditch 167 (Babtie 46) was located immediately north of ditch 168. It was visible for 20 m, extending from the eastern baulk before it terminated within the Babtie evaluation trench. It was 1.56 m wide and 0.37 m deep and was filled with dark brown silty sand (103). The ditch contained eleven fragments of post-medieval tile, a sherd of Bronze Age or Iron Age pottery and a late Mesolithic/earlier Neolithic flint blade. Ditch 167 was cut by ditch 168.

Ditch 111 (Babtie 121) was the northernmost ditch, measuring 1.5 m in width and 0.83 m in depth with steep straight sides and a narrow flat base (Fig. 4.3). It was filled with mid to light greyish brown silt (105, 107, 109) which contained a sherd of post-medieval pottery.

#### **Undated ditches**

Two undated ditches (166, 169) were identified in the southernmost 50 m of the site. The northern terminal of ditch 166 was found 2 m north of the Babtie evaluation trench. The ditch was aligned north-east to south-west but turned through 90° 1 m before the western baulk. It measured 0.7 m in width and 0.13 m in depth and it contained dark brown silty sand (146) with occasional charcoal flecks. Ditch 169 clearly terminated within the section excavated to investigate ditches 165 and 167 but was not discernible within the plough-spread ditch fills to the north of the section. It had a maximum width of 0.60 m and depth of 0.30 m with a roughly V-shaped profile. It was filled with light brown sandy silt (156, 158) and appeared to cut ditch 165.

Three undated ditches (163, 99 and 162) were found north of Babtie evaluation trench 1 and south of the southernmost pipeline. Ditch 163 extended from the eastern baulk and terminated 2.5 m short of the western baulk. It varied in width from 0.30 m to 0.94 m and between 0.09 m and 0.17 m in depth. The ditch had an irregular base and edges and was filled with mid brown sandy silt (67, 69, 71). Ditch 99 terminated within 3 m of the western baulk. It was 0.90 m wide and 0.53 m deep and was filled with reddish brown silty clay (98). Ditch 162 extended for 6 m from the eastern baulk. It was irregular in plan, partly because it cut several tree-throw holes, 30, 32 and 39. The ditch measured between 1 m and 1.5 m in width and varied in depth between 0.13 m and 0.38 m. It had a flat base and short steep sides and was filled with sandy silt (35, 37, 38).

Two undated ditches (78, 59) and a gully (160) were found within the two discrete areas created by excavation between the pipelines. Ditch 59 measured in excess of 1.6 m in width and, where excavated, it had a maximum depth of 0.38 m. A full profile could not be established because it extended beneath the eastern baulk. The sterile light to mid yellow silty sand fill (60, 62) was different to those of any of the other excavated features, with the exception of gully 160. The gully measured 0.63 m in width and 0.10 m in depth and it had a shallow, gently concave profile. It appeared to feed into ditch 59.

The terminal of possible ditch 78 was located 2 m north of the northern baulk of the southern pipeline. This feature extended beneath the baulk left around the pipeline but was not observed south of it.

#### **Undated pit**

Pit 4 was sub-circular in plan and measured 2.4 m in width and 0.95 m in depth. In section it had a flat base and steep, slightly concave sides (Fig. 4.4). There was evidence for slumping of the gravel edges, but it was otherwise filled with a single deposit of light orange brown fine sandy silt (6) with a large amount of flint gravel inclusions. The location of the pit, within 10 m of probable Roman wells 46 and 55, suggests that the pit may also be Roman.

#### **Ploughmarks**

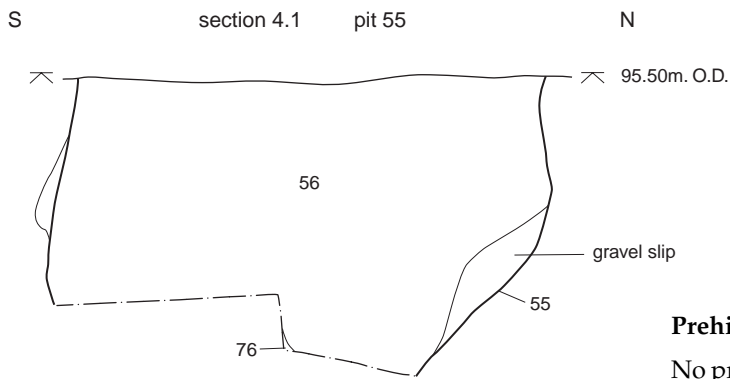
The area to the north of the bridleway was cut by a series of modern east-west oriented ploughmarks.

### **THE FINDS**

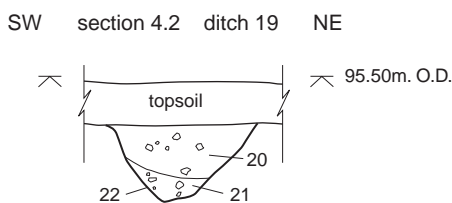
#### **Prehistoric and Roman pottery**

*by Paul Booth*

The OAU excavation and the evaluation carried out by Babtie altogether produced 41 sherds of pottery of all periods: 7 prehistoric (36 g), 31 Roman (415 g), 1 medieval (4 g) and 2 post-medieval (11 g), of which only 7 Roman and 1 post-medieval sherd came from the evaluation. The material was scanned fairly rapidly and

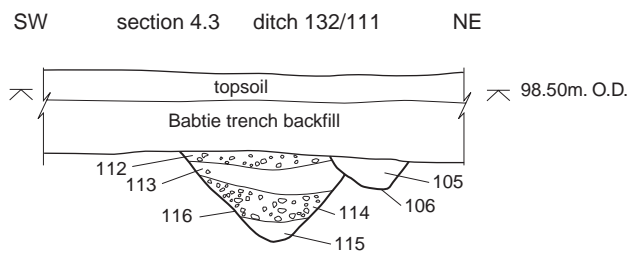


recorded with regard to broad fabric and type categories using codes established in the OAU Roman pottery recording system. Quantification was by sherd count and weight and a count of vessels based on rim sherds. The pottery was at best in moderate condition. It was generally slightly to moderately abraded and the average sherd weight was not particularly high.



### Prehistoric Pottery

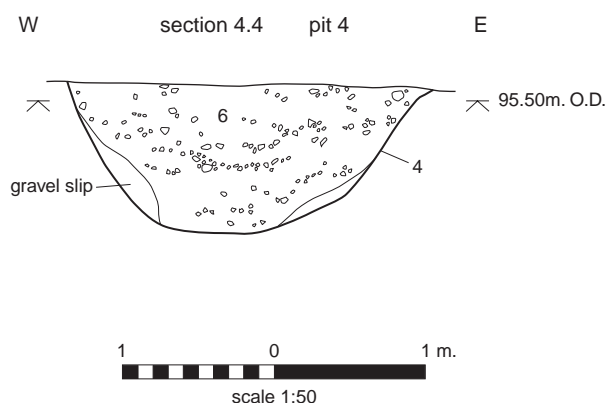
No prehistoric pottery was recovered in the evaluation. The subsequent excavation produced 7 sherds: 3 (11 g) in flint-tempered fabrics, 1 (2 g) in a quartzite-tempered fabric and 3 (23 g) in sand-tempered fabrics. All were undiagnostic body sherds, so any assessment of dating has to rely on criteria of fabric alone. The character of the sand-tempered sherds was consistent with a middle-late Iron Age date. The other fabrics were potentially assignable to a wider date range, though the quartzite-tempered sherd may be of late Bronze Age date and indicate in turn a similar date for the flint-tempered fragments. The latter tradition has a wide chronological range, however, and an Iron Age or even an early Roman date is possible for these sherds on fabric grounds. Two sand-tempered sherds (in contexts 54 and 103) and two flint-tempered sherds (from 94 and 153) were the only sherds from their respective contexts and might therefore indicate a pre-Roman date for these features. This cannot be regarded as certain, however, and the total quantity of this material indicates at best a low level of prehistoric activity on or close to the site.



### Roman Pottery

#### Fabrics

The following fabric/ware groups were represented:



- S30. Central Gaulish samian ware. 1 sherd, 37 g.
- F53. New Forest colour-coated ware. 1 sherd, 5 g.
- F54. New Forest (near-stoneware) colour-coated ware. 1 sherd, 35 g; indented beaker.
- O. Uncertain oxidised fabrics, not certainly Roman. 2 sherds, 4 g.
- O10. Fine oxidised wares. 2 sherds, 32 g.
- O11. Fine oxidised fabric. 1 sherd, 16 g; rim of narrow-mouthed jar.
- O30. Fairly fine sand-tempered oxidised ware. 1 sherd, 3 g.
- O80. Coarse grog-tempered oxidised ware. 1 sherd, 10 g.
- R. Uncertain reduced wares. 1 sherd, 5 g.
- R10. Fine reduced wares. 1 sherd, 6 g.
- R20. Coarse sandy reduced wares. 3 sherds, 13 g.
- R30. Medium sand-tempered reduced coarse wares. 10 sherds, 117 g; one rim of straight-sided dish.
- R90. Coarse grog-tempered reduced ware. 2 sherds, 105 g; rim of large bead-rimmed storage jar.
- B11. Black-burnished ware category 1 (BB1). 4 sherds, 27 g.

Figure 4 Sections of pits 55 and 4 and of ditches 19, 111, 132

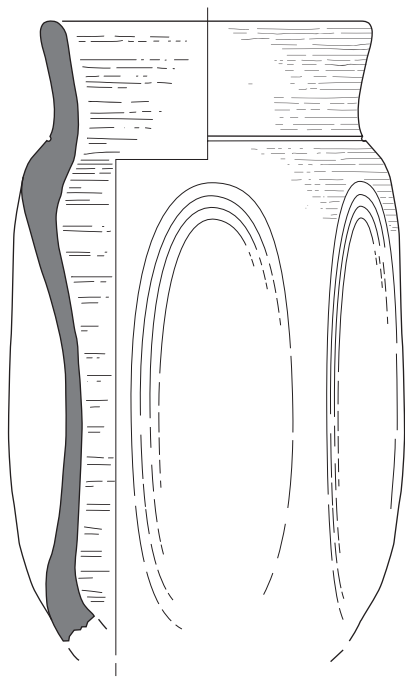


Figure 5 New Forest beaker from ditch 147. Scale 1:1

Few fabrics could be assigned with confidence to known sources. F53 and F54 were both attributable to the New Forest. Fabric O11 was consistent with production in the Oxford industry and O10 could have been from the same source, but in neither case is this certain. Fabric O30 has common fine sand-tempering consistent with production in the North Wiltshire industry. This is the most likely source, but another source cannot be precluded. The uncertain sherds recorded simply as fabric O were not certainly of Roman date. The reduced wares are not sufficiently diagnostic to allow attribution to a particular source, the most common fabric grouping, R30, having moderate sand temper characteristic of many Romanised industries. The fine sherd in fabric R10 could, like the fine oxidised sherds, have been an Oxford product, but this cannot be certain. Possible Alice Holt products were present in fabric groups R30 and R90 (see below). The black-burnished ware sherds were fairly small but were all presumably of the Dorset BB1 industry.

### Forms

Only five vessels were represented by rim sherds, few of which indicated particularly diagnostic vessel forms. The rim in fabric O11 was a narrow mouthed jar of Young (1977) form O6, if it is assumed that this was an Oxford product. General jar or jar/bowl forms were indicated by rims in fabric groups R and R30 (2). The form of a large bead-rimmed jar in fabric R90 is found, for example, in the Alice Holt industry (Lyne and Jefferies 1979, 29, class 4) but the vessel is not definitely from that source, and the same comment applies to a

'cooking pot type' jar in R30, with slip on the shoulder and rim again reminiscent of Alice Holt. The only other vessel represented by a rim was a New Forest colour-coated indented beaker of Fulford (1975) type 27 (Fig. 5). The samian sherd was probably of form 18/31 or 31 and the black-burnished sherds were apparently all from bowls or dishes.

### Chronology

The overall chronological range of the Roman component of the site is difficult to assess. The most obvious diagnostic pieces including the single sherd of samian ware are datable at least to the 2nd century, and the two New Forest vessels present are of late 3rd/4th-century date. The numerically most important reduced coarse wares are, however, not closely datable. Overall, while it is possible that the date of the entire assemblage is indicated by the late Roman material, with some residual pieces, it is most likely that the assemblage ranges from some time in the 2nd century to at least the mid 4th.

Individual context groups were too small to permit confident dating. The best group in this respect was that in evaluation Trench 2, 104. This is dated after *c.* AD 260-280 by the occurrence of New Forest colour-coated ware (Fulford 1975, 105). The sherd in question is from a closed form, perhaps a flagon or more likely a beaker, with white-painted decoration. A 4th-century date is quite possible both for this sherd and therefore for the group as a whole. The other contents of context group 104 appear consistent with a late 3rd/4th-century date.

### Illustrated vessel (Fig. 5)

1. Fabric F54 (New Forest colour-coated ware). A small, upright indented beaker with very slightly flaring rim of Fulford Type 27, closest to 27.7 (Fulford 1975, 50 and 52-3). The type is dated *c.* AD 270-340 (*ibid.*).

### Post Roman pottery by Paul Blinkhorn

Two sherds of post-Roman pottery occurred, in contexts 42 and 105. The former was part of a base of a late medieval (*c.* 15-16th century) Brill/Boarstall vessel (Mellor 1994) with internal green glaze, whilst the latter was part of the convex base of a Border ware (Pearce 1992) vessel, and is generally datable to the period 1550-1700. Such pottery is common throughout southern England.

### CERAMIC BUILDING MATERIAL

by Paul Booth

#### Introduction and quantification

The excavation and evaluation together produced some 36 fragments (3279 g) of Roman tile and 17 fragments (1356 g) of post-medieval brick and tile. Roman material came from contexts 5 and 104 of the evaluation and 20, 45, 48, 49, 52, 56, 93, 101 and 103 of the subsequent excavation.

## Results

The Roman tile was generally in a fine to moderately sandy oxidised fabric or fabrics. A few pieces were rather darker in colour, but this could indicate either overfiring or burning subsequent to manufacture. A few large pieces were recovered, but there were also several small fragments, not all of which were certainly tile, although this seems likely. Nine pieces from the excavation were identifiable as coming from *tegulae* and a large residual piece in context 5 (Trench 1) of the evaluation, while not absolutely certainly Roman, was most probably part of a *tegula* with the flange knocked off.

Two fragments from context 48 of the excavation were too thick to have been from *tegulae* and were therefore presumably from some kind of 'floor' tile, though insufficient survived to permit identification of the particular type. This would indicate the presence of a building somewhere in the vicinity of the site.

Context 104 in Trench 2 produced a number of fragments in a distinct, very sandy, quite hard fired reduced fabric. The largest piece of this material was over 30 mm thick and cannot have been pottery. It is presumed to have been overfired tile and of Roman date.

The later brick and tile was recovered mainly (in terms of weight) in the evaluation (contexts 5, 19 and unstratified). Only context 103 of the excavation produced probable post-medieval material. Here 11 of the 12 fragments were in a very heavily sand-tempered fabric broadly similar to that noted above in context 102 of the evaluation, a late Roman deposit. In excavation context 103, however, the fragments were from the corner of a fairly characteristic post-medieval tile and are presumed to be of that date.

## THE FLINT

by Theresa Durden

### Introduction and quantification

A total of 8 pieces of struck flint and 36 pieces/856 g of burnt unworked flint was recovered from the site. The flint was mottled grey/brown with a thin buff cortex and of reasonably good quality. The burnt flint was very cracked and grey/white in colour. The flint was collected from a number of pits and ditches which are probably of Roman or later date and is therefore likely to be residual.

Table 1 Summary of the charred plant remains

		pit	ditch	well
	Total number of samples	6	1	4
	No. of samples with remains	4	1	2
<i>Triticum</i> sp.	wheat grain	1	-	2
<i>Triticum</i> sp.	free-threshing wheat, rachis internode	-	-	6
<i>Triticum</i> sp. hexaploid	bread-type wheat rachis internode	-	-	1
<i>Hordeum</i> sp.	barley, hulled grain	1	-	-
<i>Hordeum</i> sp.	barley grain	-	-	-
<i>Avena</i> sp.	oat, grain	-	-	1
Cereal indet.	grain	1	-	3
Weeds			1	10+
Charcoal				
<i>Quercus</i> sp.	oak	frequent	-	-
Pomoideae	<i>hawthorn, apple/pear etc.</i>	present	-	-
<i>Corylus/Alnus</i> sp.	hazel/ alder	present	-	-

## Results

Seven flakes and one retouched blade form the struck component. The flakes were broad and had plain or unprepared butts apart from one flake from context 5 which had a faceted butt. The other flake from this context had an abraded platform edge. Both hard and soft hammers appear to have been used. The blade from context 103 was broken, but had an abraded platform and was retouched along the inverse right hand side. Traces of wear were also apparent along this edge.

Dating is difficult due to the small size of this collection. The flakes may be broadly datable to the later Neolithic/early Bronze Age, although the flake with the abraded platform may be slightly earlier. The blade is likely to be of late Mesolithic/earlier Neolithic date.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL REMAINS

### The charred and waterlogged plant remains

by Ruth Pelling

#### Introduction

A total of 10 samples, taken from pits, a ditch section and a Roman well, were processed for the retrieval of charred plant remains using bulk water separation. Samples of up to 30 litres in volume were taken. Flots were collected onto a 500 mm mesh. The flots were allowed to air dry slowly before being scanned under a binocular microscope at magnification of x 10 to x 25. In addition a series of six auger samples were taken from the upper fill of a well (context 54) for the examination of any waterlogged plant remains. Sub-samples of 200–400 g were processed by hand using a wash-over technique. Flots were collected onto a 500 mm mesh and kept wet while being scanned as above.

#### Results

A summary of the charred plant remains is displayed below (Table 1). Small quantities of charred seeds and chaff were present in seven samples. Occasional grains of *Triticum* sp. (wheat) and *Hordeum* sp. (barley) were present. One *Hordeum* sp. grain displayed clear evidence of hulling. Occasional weed seeds, including



Chenopodiaceae and *Vicia/Lathyrus* sp. (vetch/vetchling) were noted. One well sample (sample 21–24, context 44) was more unusual in that it contained the rachis of free-threshing *Triticum* sp. including hexaploid, bread-type wheat. This sample also produced a grain of *Avena* sp. (oat). Occasional modern bread-type wheat rachis and indeterminate culm nodes were also present in sample 21–24, however, which suggests some contamination. A large quantity of *Quercus* sp. (oak) charcoal was present in sample 4, taken from pit 26. Smaller quantities of Pomoideae (hawthorn, apple, pear etc.) and *Corylus/Alnus* sp. (hazel/alder) charcoal were noted in two further pit samples (27 and 15). No evidence for waterlogged deposits was recovered from any of the samples.

Charred and waterlogged plant remains did not survive well. Occasional charred grains of wheat and barley are to be expected on most archaeological sites. Free-threshing wheat and oat recovered from sample 21–24 are more characteristic of Saxon and medieval assemblages than Roman and the presence of modern remains suggests contamination. The taxa represented by the charcoal would all have been readily available within the vicinity of the site.

## DISCUSSION

The evaluation and subsequent excavation of the area affected by the proposed Thatcham Northern Distributor road suggest that although there may have been prehistoric activity on or near the site, the earliest datable features resulted from low-level rural Roman activity, probably from the 2nd century AD onwards.

The evidence for prehistoric activity in the area consisted of seven sherds (36 g) of pottery broadly dated to the Bronze Age/Iron Age and eight pieces of struck flint broadly dated to the late Mesolithic/early Bronze Age. Ditches 164 and 165 contained three flint flakes and three sherds of pottery respectively and may, therefore, have been prehistoric features, although there was insufficient material to be certain. The fact that both ditch 167 and pit 46 contained residual prehistoric material illustrates the problem in dating ditches 164 or 165 as prehistoric. The fact that Roman ditch 147 and post-medieval ditches 167 and 168 were all oriented north-east - south-west suggests that there may have been recutting of a long-established boundary.

The contamination of the soil samples taken from the probable Roman wells with modern and possibly Saxon organic material highlights the problem of residuality and, therefore, the difficulty in obtaining reliable dates. It also means that very little can be determined about the use of the ditches or the conditions in the surrounding landscape.

Three east-west aligned ditches (132, 143, 19) and a ditch aligned north-east – south-west (147) were cut in the Roman period, either for drainage or as boundaries, two wells (46, 55) were sunk and it is possible that pit (4) was dug as a grain store. This activity was concentrated upon the free-draining Valley gravel in the middle of the excavated area. The concentration of tree-throw holes in the vicinity of the wells suggests

that there was fairly substantial tree-clearance prior to the use of the site.

Ditch 161 must have been Roman or earlier because it was cut by the Roman well 46. However, a more precise date is impossible to determine. The same is true of ditches 162 and 163, which could not be dated by artefacts or stratigraphy. The fact that all of the features found on the gravels were Roman might suggest that the ditches could be dated to that period on spatial grounds, but this is purely speculative.

The results of the excavation in advance of the construction of the Northern Distributor road fit very well with the picture of the development of Roman Thatcham established by the excavations of Harris (1937) and added to by the evaluation of Henwick Lane (Ford 1992). Harris identified a black layer varying in thickness from an inch to a foot, extending for 1000 feet east to west along the A4 Bath Road and measuring 70 feet north to south. He argued that Ermin Street, connecting London and Caerleon, extended through Thatcham largely beneath the modern A4. He further suggested that the Roman town of Spinae previously associated with modern Speen was instead located beneath modern Thatcham.

Ford (1992) did not find any evidence for a Roman road on the line projected by either Harris (1937) or Margary (1973), and no evidence for the road was found within the corridor of the Northern Distributor road. Harris described a hard surface in Henwick Field, identified with an iron probe, which he believed to be Ermin Street. However, it was not exposed by excavation (Harris 1937). If Ermin Street was constructed on an alignment through Henwick Field and the line of the distributor road, it seems unlikely that it should have been missed both by archaeogeophysical survey and excavation, especially considering Margary's description that large sections of the *agger* of Ermin Street still stand 3 feet high (Margary 1973). It appears more likely that Ermin Street continued further west on the line of the modern A4, before being realigned to Speen.

Harris excavated at least six stone-lined wells along with the possible stone footings of several buildings and numerous ditches, one at least 6 feet wide and 3 feet deep. He also observed the excavation of a possible flue in the garden of Miss J Searle (Harris 1937). Most of these features were dated to the 2nd century AD or later and the bulk of them were found within 150 m of the A4. Ford identified a similar range of features of this date. With the exception of Ford's trench 11, the results of his evaluation suggested that the density of features decreased with movement west along the Bath Road and with movement north away from the road. The results of the OAU's excavation confirm that impression. On the western outskirts of modern Thatcham there is evidence for low level 2nd-century AD and later Roman activity, peripheral to a likely roadside settlement to the east. The wells are likely to have been used to water livestock and/or crops and it is possible that pit 4 was used as a grain store. The discovery of tile within the ditch fills suggests that there was at least one substantial stone built, roofed building in fairly close proximity.



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