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The watching brief was undertaken by Ian Scott. The final report was written by Ian Scott and was edited by Jamie Quartermaine and Rachel Newman. The project was managed by Jamie Quartermaine.

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## SUMMARY

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An archaeological watching brief was carried out by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU) at Vale Royal, Cheshire (centred NGR SJ 634698), along the corridor of a proposed housing development road. The work was undertaken in July 1997 following the topsoil strip for this access corridor.

A pure stone-free sand was encountered directly below topsoil, comprising a layer in excess of 1.4m depth. Occasional lenses of fine gravel were encountered within the sand, and were more frequent towards the upper levels of low hillocks where the gravel directly underlay the organic topsoil, and filled a series of very shallow natural depressions in the surface of the sand. These deposits were interpreted as of geological origin.

No archaeological features were identified in any of these areas, and no artefacts were recorded.

The present watching brief, in conjunction with the previous archaeological evaluation (LUAU 1997a) in the same area, has not identified a significant archaeological resource within the housing development, to the west of the Great House ha-ha, that will be affected by the proposed development.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 Project Background

- 1.1.1 A watching brief was undertaken by Lancaster University Archaeological Unit (LUAU) at Vale Royal, Cheshire (centred NGR SJ 634698) (Fig 1) in July 1997, at the request of DHC Ltd. This was undertaken following topsoil removal along the access route of a proposed housing development to the west of the Medieval abbey of Vale Royal. The work was required as a condition of planning consent, in advance of a proposed development, which included the construction of up to 50 new houses. It was undertaken in accordance with a verbal brief by the Principal Archaeologist of Cheshire County Council.
- 1.1.2 Vale Royal is the site of a former Cistercian abbey and is scheduled as an ancient monument of national importance (Cheshire 76). The scheduled area is centred on the site of the abbey church and is to the north and east of the post-dissolution Great House. The proposed housing development is to the west of the more sensitive scheduled area (Fig 2).
- 1.1.3 The watching brief was intended to examine a narrow corridor through the extent of the proposed housing development, provided by the stripping of topsoil for the access road to the housing.
- 1.1.4 The present watching brief follows on from an extensive programme of archaeological work which has examined the fabric of the Great House (LUAU 1995b and 1998), has evaluated the scheduled area to the east of the Great House (LUAU 1997b), has assessed the archaeological potential of the former estate in advance of a proposed golf course (LUAU 1995a) and has evaluated by trial trenching the same area (LUAU 1997a).

### 1.2 Topography and Geology

- 1.2.1 The Vale Royal area is underlain by Triassic mudstones and sandstones (Hebblethwaite 1987, 23), including 'Keuper Marl', Dolomitic Conglomerate and Rhaetic. The overlying drift is boulder clay and glacial sands and the topsoil is generally sandy loams with clay patches (Furness 1978, end map).
- 1.2.2 Vale Royal Abbey lies at around 32m AOD, within an undulating landscape, close to the River Weaver; it is on the first river terrace which rises, as a low cliff, c3-4m above the river, and is crossed by numerous brooks and streams which feed into the Weaver catchment. The study area is bounded to the east by the River Weaver, to the north by copses, which mark the positions of the former fish ponds of the abbey, and to the west by a minor road running from Hartfordbeach, through Whitegate to Winsford. The southern boundary is formed by the access road from Whitegate to

the former abbey, although the trees fringing the western end of this road lay beyond the area under investigation.

### 1.3 Historical Background

- 1.3.1 There is little evidence for prehistoric activity in this area, although a Bronze Age palstave has been found in the vicinity. Recent work, however, has suggested that the rivers and river valleys of Cheshire, with their light sandy soils, formed natural routes and locations for settlement in the pre-Roman period (Leah *et al* 1997). No evidence for Roman activity has as yet been found near this site.
- 1.3.2 The study area is situated within the environs of the Cistercian Abbey of Vale Royal. Edward I and his queen laid the foundation stones of the altar in 1277 and the abbot and monks moved into temporary buildings on the site in 1281. By 1283 construction was sufficiently well advanced for the site to be consecrated and the abbey precinct boundaries were marked by a great ditch (Brownbill 1914, 12). It was not until 1330, however, that the abbot and his monks (30, not the 100 originally planned) moved from the 'unsightly and ruinous' temporary buildings erected 50 years before, into the abbey proper (Kettle 1980).
- 1.3.3 Vale Royal Abbey was dissolved, after much negotiation, in 1538. It was first leased and then, in 1544, sold to Thomas Holcroft, who swiftly 'plucked down' the church and built a house on the site of part of the monastic buildings (the south and west claustral ranges). His house, though much altered, remains standing today. In 1616 the property passed to the Cholmondeley family, who made further alterations to the house (LUAU 1995b, 17). Ownership remained with the Cholmondeleys until 1947, when the house and land was acquired by Imperial Chemical Industries. Since 1961 the house has been vacant, but was bought by DHC (Bradford) Ltd for conversion to flats and a golf club-house, the associated land being developed as a golf course and housing development.

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

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- 2.1 A total of one man day was spent on site during the watching brief, which examined a total length of c850m of road corridor.
- 2.2 The corridor, of the housing development access road was 10m wide. It was typically excavated to a depth of 1.2m, although some areas had been excavated to 2.1m in depth; the minimum strip depth was 0.45m. It had been excavated using a large tracked mechanical excavator with a toothed ditching bucket.
- 2.3 The stratigraphy and archaeological features were recorded using methods employed by LUAU in accordance with those recommended by English Heritage's Central Archaeology Service (CAS). Recording was in the form of *pro forma* trench sheets, and, where necessary, individual context sheets. Accurate scale drawings (plans at 1:20 and sections at both 1:10 and 1:20) were made where appropriate, and photographs (black and white prints and colour transparencies) were taken as necessary. On-site assessment of the deposits suggested it was not necessary to take environmental samples. Any finds were handled and stored according to standard practice (following current Institute of Field Archaeologists guidelines) in order to minimise deterioration.
- 2.4 A full archive has been produced to a professional standard in accordance with current English Heritage (1991) guidelines.

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## 3. WATCHING BRIEF RESULTS

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### 3.1 General Stratigraphy

- 3.1.1 This watching brief was undertaken in order to record the excavation of the access road corridor through the area of the proposed housing development (Fig 2). The upper levels of topsoil and subsoil alongside natural sands had been removed prior to the watching brief, exposing a layer of dark organic material which formed the remnants of the topsoil; this was typically found at a depth of between 0.18m and 0.07m from the surface.
- 3.1.2 The organic topsoil deposit covered a yellowish brown stone-free sand which was encountered throughout the length of the study corridor, and this sand layer was found to be in excess of 1.4m depth. Occasional lenses of fine gravel were encountered within the sand and these were more frequent towards the upper levels of low hillocks where the gravel directly underlay the organic topsoil, and filled a series of very shallow natural depressions in the surface of the sand. The sand and gravel deposits have been interpreted as the natural geological subsoil.

### 3.2 Archaeological Resource

- 3.2.1 No archaeological features were identified within the study corridor and no artefacts were observed.

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## 4. DISCUSSION

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- 4.1 The topsoil stripping was of such a depth as to expose the natural sands and gravels and to remove most topsoil/subsoils. No surviving archaeological remains were encountered either above or cut into the natural deposits.
- 4.2 This negative evidence is not necessarily indicative of a low level of archaeological activity within the study corridor as the depth of the topsoil strip resulted in the removal of much of the overlying subsoils prior to the watching brief.
- 4.3 It has been established from documentary sources that the whole of the study corridor was within the abbey precinct (LUAU 1995b), but the lack of archaeological features suggests that activity within the area of the housing development was of an agricultural character. The earlier evaluation established that the precinct area had residual elements of an early field system and there was at least one possible lynchet in evaluation Trench 10 (LUAU 1997a, 25), which lay within the extent of the housing development area. The Cistercian order was famous for the development of the wool trade, and at the Dissolution it was noted that a great number of cattle were 'in the monks own hands' (Harris and Thacker 1987). It is probable therefore that there was a mixed agriculture practised within the precinct. The lack of archaeological features identified by the watching brief may in part reflect the fact that the area has had a predominantly agricultural usage since the establishment of the abbey.



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## 5. ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT

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- 5.1 The archaeological watching brief of the road corridor has revealed no archaeological features or artefacts. This would largely accord with the results of the evaluation of the housing development area (LUAU 1997a) which identified only occasional evidence of agricultural features. The present evidence suggests that the proposed housing development, to the west of the ha-ha constructed around the Great House will not have an impact upon any significant archaeological resource. The area to the east of the ha-ha, however, was not examined by the present watching brief.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

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Fig 1 Vale Royal Location Map

Fig 2 Study Area