

Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society

Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeology Society Newsletter: April 2011

ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIRMINGHAM

Sutton Park as you've never seen it before!

A LiDAR (aerial laser) survey was carried out to assist future management and protection of this multi-period historic landscape. It provided a detailed record of features that were already known but obscured by vegetation, such as the banks and ditches subdividing the medieval deer park and the quarry pits alongside the Roman road, and revealed many previously unrecorded features. These included embanked pits, possibly used in the production of whitecoal, ridges indicating former cultivation, former field boundaries, earthworks that may be related to the Roman road, and two possible burnt mounds. In addition, a local researcher has located many sawpits in the Park's historic woodland.

The Park's potential to provide information on past environmental conditions was assessed. The undated results of previous pollen analysis of peat deposits up to 0.9m deep in the Longmoor Valley and antiquarian records of Scots Pine under the peat suggest that it dates to at least 5000 BC, but any later deposits have been destroyed by peat cutting which was taking place here in the 18th century and probably earlier. Augering showed that other valleys in the Park contained well-preserved peat over 0.6m deep which had not been affected by peat cutting.

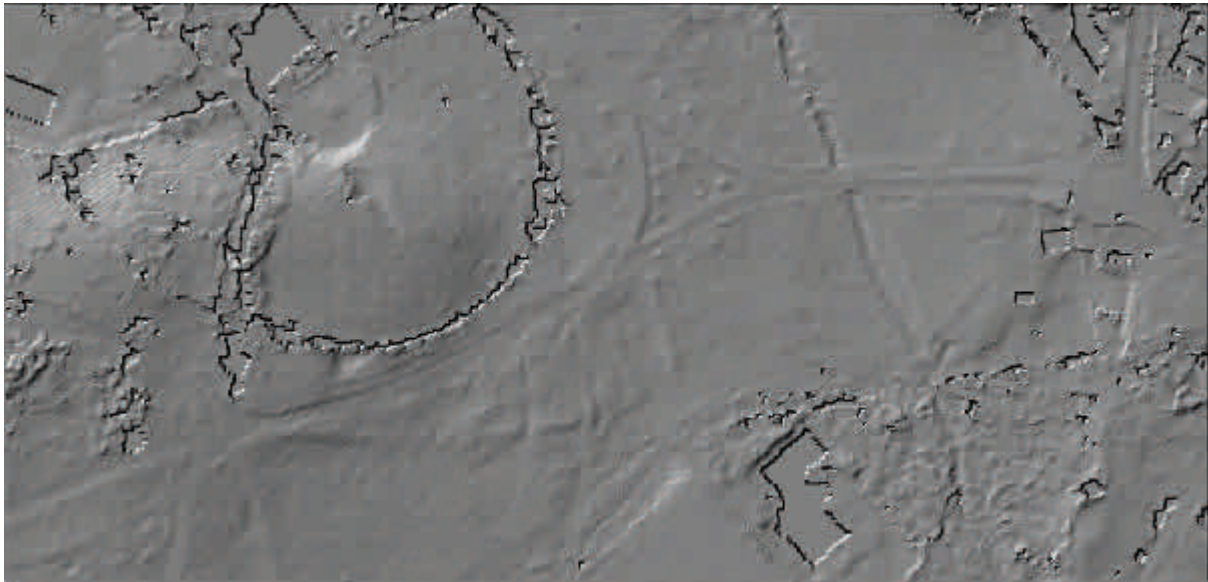


Fig. 1: LiDAR (Light detection and ranging) survey of part of Sutton Park

Birmingham city centre: backyards and a brassworks

In Carrs Lane (Fig. 2), behind the High Street, there were several pits dating from the 14th to the 18th centuries, separated by layers of soil dumped to level up the ground surface. The oldest pit was roughly circular and was covered by a layer containing medieval pottery. Following further dumping, two pits were dug which were both lined with clay to retain water. A later pit was also clay-lined and was covered by planks held in place by a jointed cross beam. The pits are likely to have been originally intended for an industrial process but may have been used as cesspits when their industrial use ceased. Cattle horn cores show that leather tanning or horn working was taking place.

For further information on archaeology in Birmingham visit: www.birmingham.gov.uk/archaeology



Fig. 2: Part of the Carrs Lane site being excavated by staff from Birmingham Archaeology

In Dean Street, near the Markets, excavations revealed a former stream, probably the Dirtley Brook which is marked on historic maps. Timbers and wood fragments found lying on the surface of a wide expanse of river gravels and silts may be part of a revetment along the stream. A pit partly lined with wooden planks and plant debris, including willow twigs, dug into made ground over the silts may be one of the osier pits marked on a map of 1808, which were used to soak willows for basket making. Basket makers were working in this area between 1770 and 1830.

Excavations in **Cambridge Street** on the site of the new Library of Birmingham revealed well-preserved remains of a 19th-century brass works (Fig.2). The works principally manufactured decorative brass objects such as bedsteads and house fittings and later became engaged in metal rolling, gas fitting, and wire manufacture. The site developed in the 1820s following the cutting of two canal arms in 1811. Structural evidence of the different phases of boiler and engine bases powering a large brass rolling and wire drawing mill were found and other features included the engine fly wheel pits, rolling and wire drawing machine bases, boiler flues and chimney, hearths and furnaces. The positions of some of these structures could be identified on historic plans but others were not, such as the furnaces and casting pits. The whole site was extended in the mid 19th century and the remains of further complex of workshops, working areas and crucible furnaces were investigated. Many of the buildings were pulled down in the 1920s and the site was levelled to make way for a grand civic centre scheme which was never completed.



Fig. 3: (left) Remains of the brass works on the new library site



Fig. 5: (right) Brick kiln under excavation

In the suburbs: farm buildings and a brick kiln

A detailed record was made of farm buildings near Peddimore Hall prior to their conversion to dwellings. The oldest surviving building is a timber-framed barn, with its walls resting on stone footings. Only parts of the original timber-framed walls remain, because they were mostly replaced by brick at a later date, but there are substantial roof trusses which include timbers reused from earlier buildings (Fig. 4). Tree-ring dating showed that the barn was built in the early 18th century using timbers from 16th- and 17th-century buildings, possibly earlier barns.

Saltley had a rural appearance until the 19th century when rapid residential and industrial development took place. The industries included manufacturing bricks using local clay as a raw material. One of the many brick kilns in this area was excavated as part of redevelopment (Fig. 5). It was part of a small brickworks marked on the Ordnance Survey map of 1890 which consisted of two kilns, a drying shed and a clay pit and was disused by about 1900.

The kiln was roughly rectangular, 10m long and 5m wide, with flues along the walls to allow heat to circulate and openings at both ends for the bricks to be loaded and unloaded. The subsoil under the kiln had been baked hard



Fig. 4: Reused timber in barn roof truss

ARCHAEOLOGY IN WARWICKSHIRE

In the first half of the year Warwickshire Museum carried out a reasonably large area excavation at Parkside, Coventry (Figs 6-10). This took place alongside Short Street, actually a name for this part of the medieval Much Park Street created after the area was severely altered by the highly destructive ring road. The actual medieval and later street frontage now lies under a particularly wide pavement alongside short street. However, excavations revealed parts of the rear areas of three medieval burgage plots with the remains of stone foundations from ranges of buildings running at right angles to the former street.

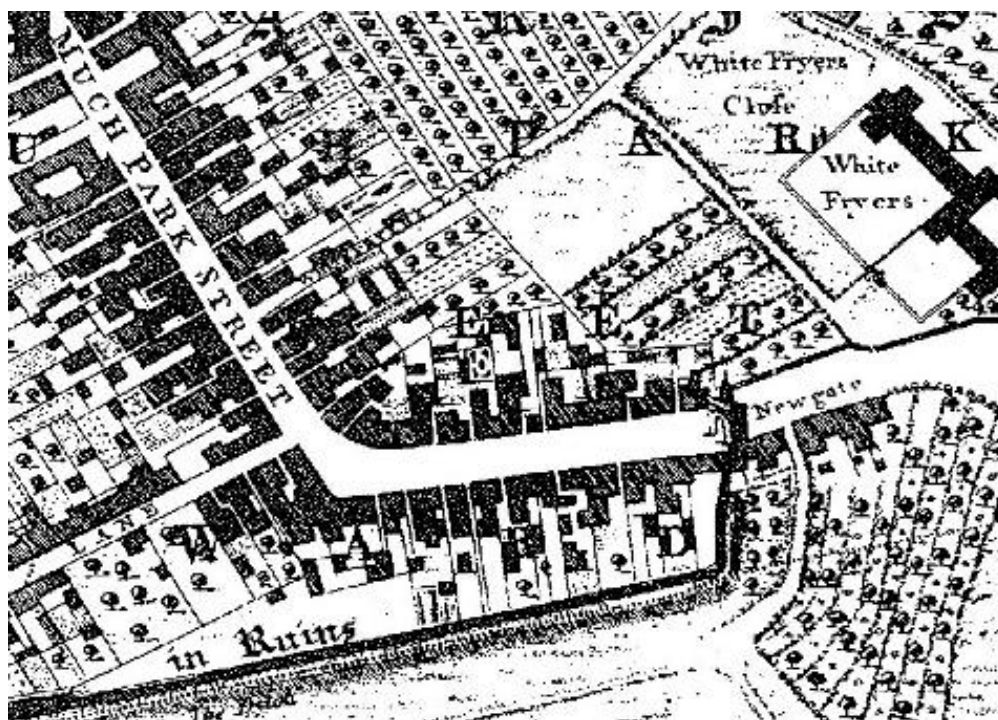


Fig. 6: Approximate location of the site (arrowed) on Samuel Bradford's map of 1748-9

The area was heavily cut by rubbish pits, many of which dated from the late 15th century and a smaller number from the 16th to early 18th centuries. A considerable assemblage of medieval pottery was recovered along with a selection of leather shoes and other fragments (a not uncommon type of find on larger excavations in Coventry). The excavated area of the central burgage plot exposed a series of rooms which contained numerous medieval floor surfaces often formed of thin layers of ash. The uppermost of these contained hundreds of copper alloy pins showing that these had been made on site in the late medieval or early post medieval period. Some evidence of metal working was found in the form of crucible fragments with the remains of copper slag adhering to them and evidence for bone working consisting of discarded offcuts and two instrument tuning pegs were also recovered. It is hoped that results from this site can be compared to another large site on Much Park Street about 100m to the north-west which was excavated by Birmingham Archaeology in 2008.



Fig. 7: Parkside site looking north



Fig. 8: A medieval foundation cut by later medieval and post-medieval rubbish pits



Fig. 9: The site looking north-east. The ranging pole lies in part of a room of an outbuilding in the central burgrave plot. The dark layers are all medieval floor layers



Fig. 10: The site looking south-west

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