
EXCAVATION AND GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY OF THE ROMAN SETTLEMENT AT CHARTERHOUSE-ON-MENDIP, 2005

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SUMMARY

A limited programme of archaeological investigation was carried out within the Roman lead-mining settlement at Charterhouse-on-Mendip, Somerset in 2005, as part of the Time Team's *Big Roman Dig* television broadcast. This comprised geophysical survey and the excavation of two small trenches within the scheduled monument. The geophysics revealed a network of enclosures and roadways on differing alignments, probably representing many different phases of settlement development, in addition to evidence for possible ore extraction 'rakes'. Unfortunately during excavation of the two trenches it became clear that contaminant levels below the topsoil were significantly higher than anticipated, and so none of the features encountered could be fully excavated. However, the remains of at least a single masonry structure were revealed in one trench, while pottery recovered from the other trench, which lay over a pronounced rectangular earthwork enclosure, revealed this feature to be of Roman date. The level of heavy metal contaminants and a small quantity of slag from both trenches confirmed that lead processing had almost certainly occurred in the immediate vicinity, and the limited ceramic evidence suggests that most activity ranged from the later 1st to 3rd century AD in date.

INTRODUCTION

A geophysical survey was carried out by GSB Prospection Ltd at Charterhouse-on-Mendip, in advance of a small-scale archaeological investigation in July 2005 by Oxford Archaeology (OA) and the Charterhouse Environs Research Team (CHERT) under the direction of Vince Russett (North Somerset District Council Archaeologist). The project aimed to enhance understanding and address key issues relating to the Roman occupation site at Charterhouse, and formed part of Time Team's *Big Roman Dig* live television broadcast. Specifically it was hoped to refine the chronology of the site (especially the earthwork enclosure in Trench 1), search for evidence of zoning (eg military, domestic, industrial, transport etc) and examine the reasons for its apparent abandonment after the Roman period (OA 2005).

The site lies at NGR ST 503 558 (centred), in the Mendip Hills, c. 4.5 km north-east of Cheddar and c. 0.5km north-east of Charterhouse (Fig. 1). The geophysical survey and excavation trenches lay within Town Field in the area of the scheduled monument. The local geology comprises limestone bedrock overlain by clays. Relatively little ploughing has occurred on site and present land-use is grassland pasture, which accounts for the generally good preservation of the earthworks.

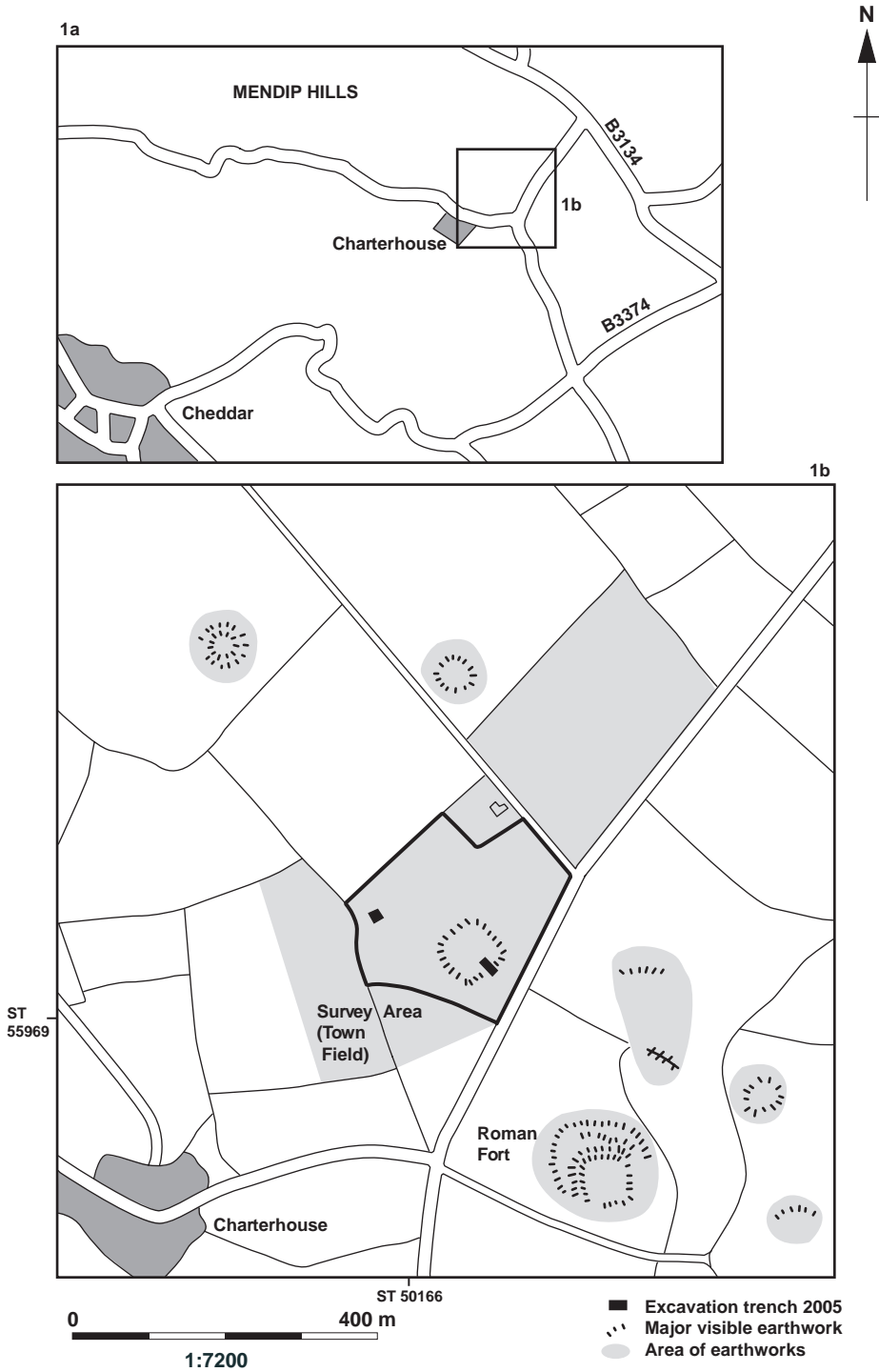


Fig. 1 Site location

Archaeological background

The Roman settlement at Charterhouse-on-Mendip is characterized by a series of earthworks extending over a considerable area (Fig. 1), one of a number of earthwork groups in the region (Donovan 1949). The site was first recognised by the Revd John Skinner, Rector of Camerton and renowned antiquary, on 6 August 1819 (Skinner 1820). His diary records the words on the day of discovery:

‘..What was our surprise to perceive the ground in the vicinity thickly strewn with Roman pottery, fragments of flues, roofing tiles &c..’

Skinner, an obsessive recorder of antiquities, returned to Charterhouse many times over the next few years, both drawing the earthworks he saw, and indulging in some rather amateur excavation. The next archaeological investigation of the site was not until 1948–9 when two trial trenches were dug through earthworks to the north-east of the present site, and produced a small quantity of 2nd–3rd century pottery (Boon 1951). In the 1960s the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society carried out a series of small-scale excavations of the Roman settlement, revealing ditches, pits and two mortared walls (Budge *et al.* 1974). Lead waste and industrial material was recovered and the pottery suggested occupation concentrating in the 1st to 3rd centuries AD, but with some later Roman activity. From 1993–5, Todd excavated parts of a substantial multi-vallate earthwork enclosure to the south-east of the present site, which was interpreted as a ‘fortlet’ occupied from AD 50 to *c.* 65 and then again in the early 70s (Todd 2000; Fig. 1). The earthwork was seen to be the work of the Roman army on the evidence of associated finds, but rather than housing a small garrison, it was suggested as a centre for the processing of ore and storage of metal (Todd 2000). Malcolm Todd also investigated a number of grooves or ‘rakes’, which seem likely to represent extraction from ore-bodies lying close to the surface (Todd 2000; 1995). They were located near to the ‘fortlet’ and would seem to be related to it, as the main period of mineral extraction was the mid–late 1st century AD. After this the focus of mining seems to have shifted, probably to the west of the Charterhouse valley (see below).

The first detailed earthwork survey of the Charterhouse settlement was carried out by CHERT in 2003–5 and this work remains ongoing.

Methodology

Prior to the excavation a magnetometer survey was carried out by GSB Prospection Ltd over the 4.5ha of Town Field (Fig. 2), with targeted resistivity survey over two smaller areas (0.64ha) within this field. A further two areas (totalling 1.8ha) to the north and west of Town Field were surveyed in conjunction with the excavation. When the results of these surveys were combined with the earthwork survey by CHERT, the scale and complexity of the site was revealed, with dense occupation in the form of apparent buildings on either side of a central roadway. Two excavation trenches were selected within the area of the scheduled monument on the basis of the survey results, in order to characterize the date and nature of occupation in these areas of the site. All turf and topsoil was removed by hand but unfortunately due to the high levels of contamination encountered it was not considered safe to excavate any of the features revealed beneath. Nevertheless, all visible features were recorded and planned and the finds (mostly from the topsoil) were catalogued and analysed.

Contamination

Previous excavation publications (Budge *et al.* 1974) had noted the death of livestock due to contaminants disturbed by excavation. Therefore Time Team (specifically Wildfire TV) carried out an assessment of the health and safety implications prior to excavation. A summary of contamination reports from surveys carried out in the Victorian lead-working flues (located in Velvet Bottom) and in relation to service trenches at the Charterhouse Activity Centre were obtained from Mendip District Council. In addition an application for Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) to carry out an auger sample contamination survey was submitted to, and approved by, the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) the governmental body responsible for the protection of historic monuments and the issuing of licenses for intrusive work, under advice from English Heritage. The contamination survey was carried out by Halcrow (Halcrow 2005). The report has been submitted to English Heritage South Western Region as required by the terms of the SMC.

While the survey of the Victorian lead-working flues unsurprisingly noted ‘hotspots’ of elevated lead, cadmium and arsenic levels, only ‘standard

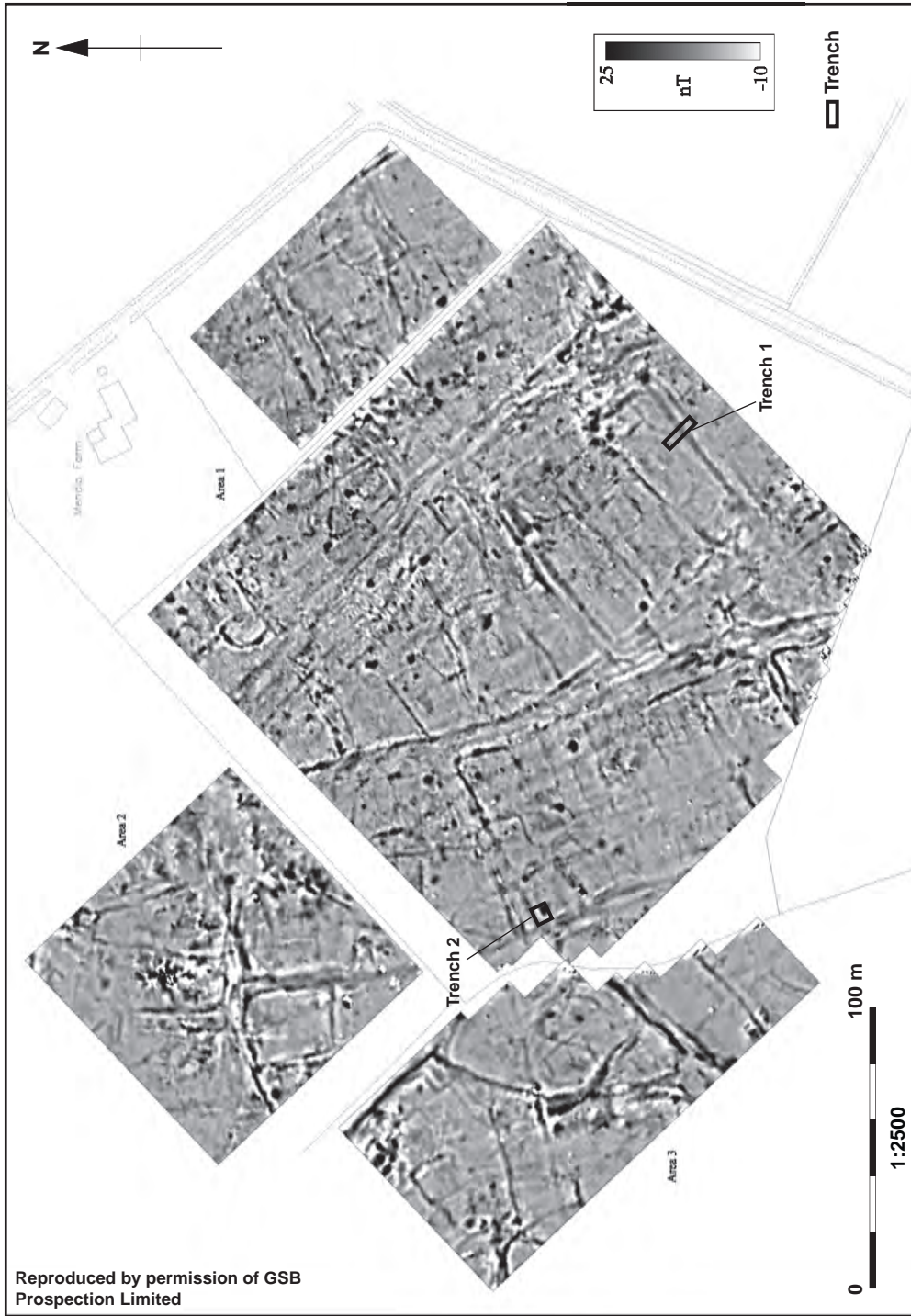


Fig. 2 Geophysical survey and trench locations; reproduced by permission of GSB Prospection Limited

background' contaminant levels were recorded in the Charterhouse Activity Centre service trench.

The Halcrow survey comprised analysis of samples retrieved from 10–60mm diameter hand-augered bore holes which were taken to a maximum depth of 0.7m where bedrock was encountered. Eight of these were located in Town Field, two further samples were taken from the adjacent fields to the west and south-west of Town Field.

Laboratory analysis of the samples indicated the presence of lead (maximum level 54,000 parts per million (ppm)) cadmium (maximum level 17 ppm) and arsenic (maximum level 171 ppm). Within the report Halcrow advised on health and safety precautions to be taken during excavation including use of full personal protective equipment (Tyvek suits, gloves, face masks etc) and a decontamination unit. In addition a portable X-Ray Fluorescence analyser (Innov-X Alpha Series) was used on-site to retrieve real time readings of the contaminant levels.

During excavation it became clear from the XRF analyser readings that contaminant levels below the topsoil were significantly higher than those recorded in the Halcrow survey and were also particularly high in archaeological features. Levels recorded in archaeological features after the removal of topsoil peaked at 6176 ppm for arsenic and 155 ppm for cadmium.

Given the variation in contaminant levels between those recorded by Halcrow (on which health and safety mitigation measures were based) and those identified during the programme of work it was considered inappropriate to continue excavation, since a considered and formal process of re-assessment of the health and safety mitigation procedures could not be carried out within the time constraints imposed by the live broadcast.

RESULTS OF THE GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

A total of 6.3ha of detailed magnetometry was carried out in three areas of Town Field using Bartington Grad 601 instruments (Fig. 2). Two smaller areas, totalling 0.64ha, were investigated by resistance survey.

The gradiometer survey identified a wealth of archaeological anomalies extending throughout the survey area. The most prominent of these formed numerous enclosures, which can be grouped into several broad patterns. The rectangular earthwork in the centre of Town Field was identified and there

were clear indications of subdivisions within it. A group of rectangular enclosures, extending from a trackway or road, displayed a degree of uniformity indicative of individual building plots. This settlement area was on a different alignment to the earthwork enclosure and could indicate a different phase of development at the site. Other groups of trackways and enclosures have been identified, on varying alignments, which have a less ordered layout, and these could indicate differing functions within the site, or possible additional phases of activity.

Several discrete anomalies have been identified that could represent burnt or fired features, and the magnitude of many of the ditch type responses throughout the survey indicates the presence of highly magnetised (ie burnt or fired) material within them. This could be accounted for in part by everyday settlement activity (eg the debris from hearths or ovens), although it seems likely that such widespread levels of magnetic enhancement are associated with industrial activity, namely the processing of lead ore.

Additionally there is some tentative evidence that ore extraction took place at some point in the sites lifespan; a band of north-west–south-east aligned parallel responses and trends immediately adjacent to the eastern side of the earthwork feature could reflect 'rakes', an interpretation perhaps supported by the increased number of industrial type responses noted in the immediate vicinity. The two excavated trenches yielded levels of arsenic and other contaminants associated with lead ore processing (see above), and this would tend to support the geophysical evidence.

The resistance survey failed to provide any clear evidence of building foundations and overall the technique has provided little or no additional archaeological information. A detailed geophysical survey report (GSB 2005) has been submitted to English Heritage as required by the terms of the Section 42 licence obtained for this survey.

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

Archaeological description

TRENCH 1 (FIG. 3)

Trench 1 (10 x 2m) was located over the north-east–south-west side of the rectangular earthwork enclosure and was intended to characterize the south-eastern facing bank of this feature. The enclosure bank started to gradually slope down at 4.2m from

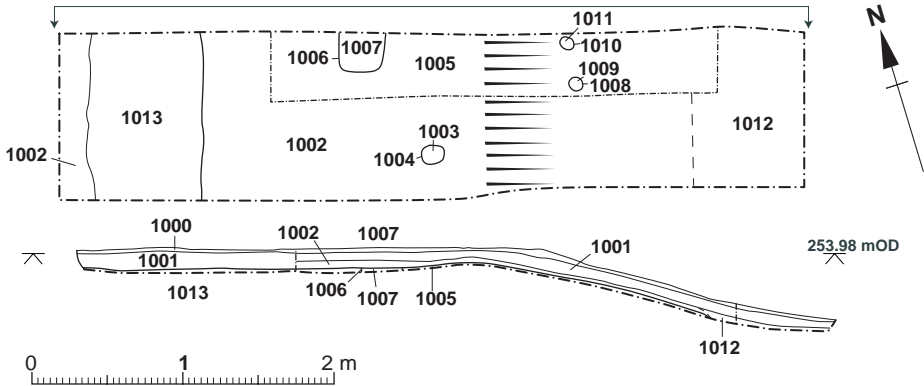


Fig. 3 Plan and section of Trench 1

the eastern end of the trench, falling approximately 0.8m to 253.98m OD (see section, Fig. 3). Excavation of the bank was limited due to the high presence of contaminants (see above) and the earliest construction layer reached was 1005, a mottled grey and yellow clay deposit, which was cut by a linear feature (1006) and two circular postholes (1008 and 1010). The linear feature, 0.5 x 0.6m across, ran approximately north-south at the top of the bank, continuing north beyond the excavation trench. It may have been a large post or beam slot, but was not fully excavated. Probably contemporary with this feature were the two postholes, both 0.1 x 0.12m across, lying 0.4m apart. They may have formed part of a fence line running north-east-south-west along the upper slope of the bank. Alternatively all or any of these features could have belonged to the construction phase of the bank as they were overlain by a yellow clay deposit which would seem to have been the final construction layer of the earthwork (1002). This layer was just 0.05m in depth, lying 0.12m below the turf line, and produced the only two stratified pieces of pottery from the excavations. At the top of the bank in the central part of the trench was a single circular posthole (1004) of the same dimensions as 1008 and 1010, which cut through the yellow clay layer. This does suggest that a structure of some kind existed on top of the bank, although the lack of any corresponding postholes makes the nature of this uncertain.

Two further deposits (1012 and 1013) on either side of the trench seem to represent layers of surface wash-off overlying parts of the bank structure and were not excavated. With the exception of the pottery from 1002, all of the finds from Trench 1 came from

the thin layer of topsoil (1001, 0.05m in depth) lying just beneath the turf. These finds included lead fragments, worked flints, pottery and a small quantity (41 pieces) of slag, which reflects the industrial nature of the site as a whole.

TRENCH 2 (FIG. 4)

Trench 2 (10.25m²) was located in the western part of Town Field, on the opposite side of a roadway to the earthwork enclosure excavated in Trench 1. It was positioned on the corner of a possible building bounded to the north and west by two substantial holloways (roadways), as indicated on the geophysical and CHERT earthwork surveys (see above and Fig. 2). As with Trench 1, none of the features revealed were fully excavated due to the high levels of contamination, and thus detailed phasing was not possible.

The earliest features comprised a group of unmortared masonry wall lines and surfaces, seemingly cutting into or resting upon the natural ground surface and probably representing a number of different phases. In the south-western corner of the Trench along the edge of the holloway was revealed part of a drystone wall (2004), 2.75m in length and with a maximum width of 0.62m. Lying less than 0.5m further east was a compacted metallised surface (2013), 0.9 x 0.4m across, which may have been a yard surface associated with one phase of the structure in this area or alternatively the base for a timber beam or drystone wall. Two further areas of stonework (2005, 2006) were located in the south-eastern part of the trench, although it is uncertain if these represent actual structures or demolition debris.

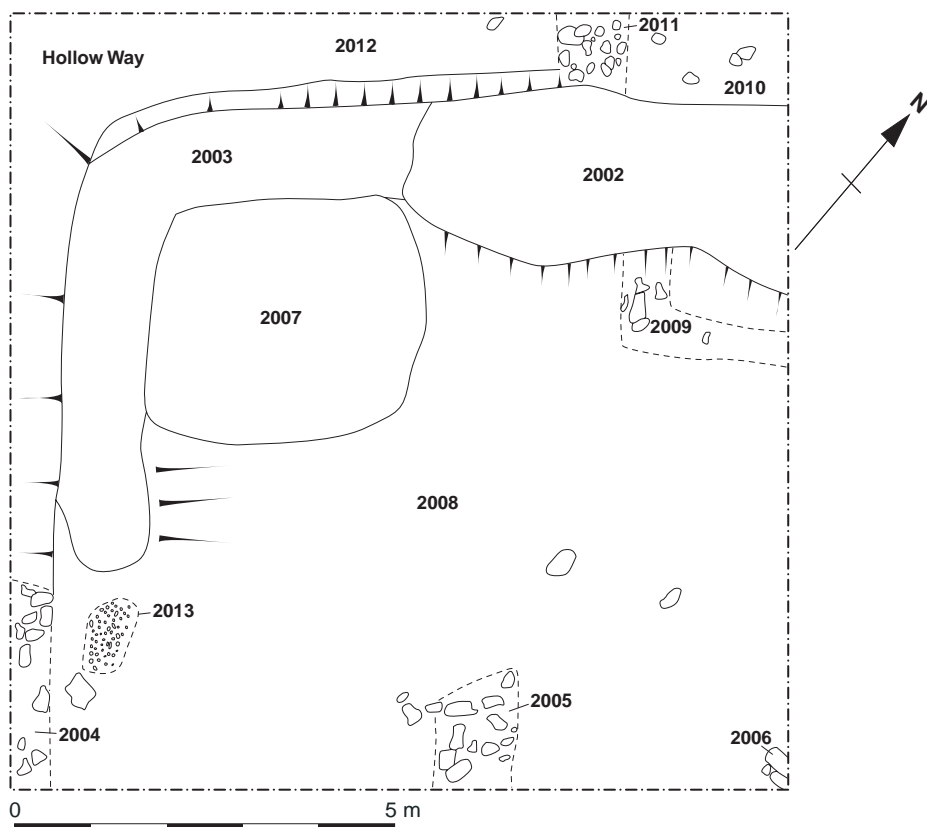


Fig. 4 Plan of Trench 2

A further area of stones to the north (2009) was of a similar character, while to the north-west was a probable early floor surface (2003) of clay and lime mortar which was traced running along the inside of the hollow ways. The only other possible structural feature was a concentration of limestone and sandstone in the north-eastern corner of the trench (2011), although this may have been demolition rubble that had been dumped into part of the hollowway.

A number of post-demolition silty-clay deposits (2008, 2012, 2010) covered all the features in the trench described above, and the only find recovered from these layers was a post-medieval iron horseshoe from 2008. An area (c. 6 x 4.5m) of dark material (2007) containing charcoal and with very high levels of arsenic was revealed in the north-western part of the trench, seeming to overlie one of these post-demolition deposits (2008). It was thought to represent a dump of waste material from lead-working in the area, although it would appear to postdate all the structures represented within this

trench, and could even be post-medieval in date as it is known that much of Mendip was extensively worked by lead miners up until the mid 19th century (Elkington 1976).

As with Trench 1, almost all of the finds (with the exception of the horseshoe) came from the topsoil of the trench (2000) and these included iron nails, lead fragments, animal bone, ceramic tile, worked flint, glass, pottery and slag. Aside from the flint, most would appear to be of Roman date (except for some post-medieval pottery and horseshoe), suggesting that there was little sustained activity on the site after this period.

FINDS

Pottery by Paul Booth

The excavation produced a small and fragmented assemblage of Roman pottery, all but one of the

sherds from topsoil contexts. Nineteen sherds (47g) were recovered from Trench 1 (contexts 1001 and 1002) and 206 sherds (1212 g) from Trench 2 (context 2000). The latter context also produced four sherds (29g) of post-medieval red-glazed earthenware.

The pottery was recorded in terms of broad ware groups and fairly generalised vessel classes, using the codes in the Oxford Archaeology Roman pottery recording system. The fragmentary (average sherd weight 5.6g) and unstratified nature of the assemblage meant that it did not warrant detailed recording in terms of fabric.

The ware groups present were:

S Samian ware	30 sherds	51g
M Mortaria	1 sherd	82g
W White wares	4 sherds	20g
Q White-slipped wares	1 sherd	8g
O Oxidised coarse wares	27 sherds	95g
R Reduced coarse wares	94 sherds	627g
B Black-burnished wares	68 sherds	376g

The samian ware appeared to be mostly Central Gaulish and included six small decorated fragments. Only two plain bowls of uncertain form were represented by rim fragments, one of which had a rivet hole. The single mortarium sherd, a hooked rim of early 2nd-century type, was badly stained so identification of the fabric is uncertain, though it is possible that the piece was of Oxford origin. Half of the oxidised coarse wares were probably Severn Valley wares, but only one vessel form was identifiable, a small beaker with a simple rounded rim probably, but not certainly, of Severn Valley ware. The assemblage was dominated by reduced coarse wares and Black burnished ware. No attempt was made to distinguish 'South-western' from Poole Harbour products in the latter group (cf Holbrook and Bidwell 1991, 88–91). Rim forms ranged from early 2nd-century cooking pot types to late 3rd–4th century bead and flanged bowls, two of which were present in context 2000. The majority of the reduced wares were in micaceous fabrics with variable sand content, though a smaller number of coarser, grog-tempered sherds were also present. Rim forms in these fabrics were mostly from jars or probable jars. Bowl and dish forms were also present, but were very fragmentary.

The only stratified sherds were two small fragments of a ring-necked flagon from context 1002, part of an upstanding bank. The sherds are in very poor condition: the fine sand-free fabric is mostly reduced but the eroded surfaces suggest that an

oxidised exterior appearance (now a dirty buff) colour was intended. The sherds cannot be assigned to a known source with confidence, although in character the fabric is similar to that of Exeter fabric 406 (Holbrook and Bidwell 1991, 139). This parallel suggests a later 1st-century date for the form.

The overall date range of the pottery extends from the late 1st or early 2nd century at least up to the end of the 3rd century. Close dating of many of the vessel forms is precluded by the small size of the sherds, but a subjective impression is that a majority of the material can be assigned to the 2nd century rather than later. Apart from the mortarium sherd, the coarse wares are probably all from local or regional sources. Samian was the only imported ware present. It is well-represented in terms of sherd count, but the particularly small average size of these pieces makes it difficult to assess their true importance.

Slag by Lynne Keys

A small quantity of slag was recovered by hand during excavations, all from topsoil. Processes other than ironworking (ie leadworking) probably produced much of the assemblage. A fragment of decayed lead, a piece of undiagnostic slag with crystals on one surface, and pieces of a black, treacle-like material were found amongst the material.

Flint by Rebecca Devaney

A total of twelve pieces of worked flint were recovered from topsoil and consisted of six flakes, two blades and a side scraper. A further three fragments (17g) of burnt unworked flint were also retrieved from one of the trenches. The condition of the flint is varied, however, most pieces are either in a fresh condition or exhibit slight post-depositional damage. Just one piece is corticated, one is burnt and four are broken. The flakes and blades are all quite small in size. A variety of technological features is represented, including lipped butts and hinge terminations on some of the flakes and platform edge abrasion and a lipped butt on the blade. The side scraper has direct retouch on the right edge and cortical backing.

The technological appearance of the worked flint from Charterhouse suggests that the material derives from the Neolithic or Bronze Age. However, due to the small size of the assemblage and without the presence of any chronologically diagnostic pieces this date cannot be further refined. The assemblage

does indicate prehistoric activity at the site prior to the Roman period.

Other finds by *Paul Booth and Alex Smith*

Six fragments of ceramic building material (154g) were recovered from the topsoil (2000) in Trench 2. At least two different fabrics were represented, but all may be of Roman date. The only certain Roman piece was a fragment with combed decoration, from a box-flue tile.

Two small fragments of glass came from context 2000. A light blue-green piece is probably from a Roman bottle. The other piece, of clear glass, is slightly curved and has a fragmentary rounded edge. A Roman date seems likely but the form is uncertain. Three square-shanked iron nails were recovered from context 2000, the longest surviving to 62mm in length. The only other metal objects to be found within the topsoil comprised eight small featureless lumps of lead (the largest weighing 598g), presumably deriving from the lead-smelting industry. A post-medieval horseshoe was recovered from post-demolition deposit 2008 in Trench 2, above which was a probable dump of waste material from later lead-working in the area (2007; see above).

Animal bone by *Fay Worley*

Only nine fragments of animal bone were recovered; eight fragments from a single sheep or goat molar and a fragment of medium mammal long bone. The condition of the skeletal fragments is poor.

DISCUSSION

Despite the severe limitations imposed on the excavations by contamination and the small excavated sample, the two small trenches combined with the extensive geophysical survey have gone some way in increasing our understanding of the chronology and character of the Roman settlement at Charterhouse. The general chronology of the pottery from the excavation trenches corresponds with that of most previous excavations in the area in suggesting occupation primarily spanning the 1st to 3rd centuries AD (Boon 1951; Budge *et al.* 1974). This also accords with a building dedication inscription previously found at Charterhouse dated to AD 212–17 (RIB 185), which suggests a thriving settlement there at the start of the 3rd century.

The quantity and quality of the ceramic assemblage is particularly poor from Trench 1 over the rectangular enclosure, although the two stratified flagon sherds from the uppermost bank construction layer may suggest an origin for this feature in the later 1st century AD. This and the remaining pottery from the topsoil in the trench indicate that this earthwork is Roman in date and not medieval as has previously been suggested (Todd 1994, fig. 1). The function of this enclosure remains obscure, however, although the small quantity of slag and general soil contamination indicates that lead smelting probably occurred in the immediate vicinity. The same is true of Trench 2 where there is also structural evidence in the form of walls and possible floor surfaces. The increased quantity of pottery from this trench could imply that it was closer to an area of domestic activity, but as this material was all very abraded and highly fragmented, this remains far from certain. It is perhaps more likely that the structure(s) in Trench 2 represent some kind of industrial workshop.

The results of the geophysical survey clearly show a loose grid pattern of streets, or holloways, most branching off from a main roadway running north-north-west–south-south-east through Town Field, very similar to features shown on aerial photographs in Field 2 to the north (OA 2005). The relationship of the rectangular enclosure to the trackway remains uncertain, but as it lies upon a different alignment it is unlikely to be directly contemporary, and is probably part of a long sequence of phased occupation within the site.

The geophysical survey also revealed a series of possible rakes lying across the settlement in Town Field (see above), suggesting that ore extraction may have occurred on site, perhaps prior to the start of occupation. The chronology of this of course cannot be known, although it is believed that the Mendip lead industry was already in existence on a small scale by the time of the Roman invasion in AD 43 (Elkington 1976, 183). Recent excavations of rakes to the south-east of Town Field indicated that the main period of mineral extraction in this area was the mid–late 1st century AD, with the possibility of late Iron Age activity (Todd 2000). It is quite plausible that any mineral extraction in the area of Town Field was contemporary with these southern rakes – and therefore also with the early Roman fortlet with which they were undoubtedly associated. By the later 1st century this fortlet had been abandoned and the focus of mineral extraction shifted to other areas, suggested as perhaps west of

the Charterhouse valley (Todd 2000). Settlement then appears to have been established in the area of Town Field and to the north, which must have been associated very closely with the expanding lead-mining industry. The current archaeological investigations have done little to further our understanding of the end of this industry in the area, although the evidence as it is suggests a decline in activity after the 3rd century AD.

Acknowledgements

The excavation at Charterhouse was proposed as a site for Time Team's *Big Roman Dig* (TTBRD) by Nick Corcos and Jenni Butterworth. The site was approved by Simon Raikes, producer of TTBRD. The project design for the excavation was compiled by Vince Russett, Richard Brown and Alex Smith in consultation with Fachtna Mcavoy of English Heritage and Bob Croft, Somerset County Archaeologist. The excavation was supervised by Richard Brown, archaeological co-ordinator for TTBRD.

Many thanks are due to Vince Russett, Albert Thompson and the members of the Charterhouse Environs Research Team who refused to be broken in spirit despite the blazing sun, pouring rain and closure of the excavations. Similarly the soul-destroying task of backfilling and returfing 140m square of excavation areas by hand, immediately after having opened them (over the space of three 13hr days) was borne with excellent humour by Kate Wheaton, Rowan Mcalley, Daniel Watkeys and Mary Saunders of the OA field team. Amy Hemingway drew the figures, and the finds and archives departments (OA) are thanked for their hard work on the project. A special mention should be given to Nadaav Soudray (assistant producer for TTBRD) who located two of the Charterhouse lead pigs at the Priory, Roehampton – one of which was propping up a radiator, the other acting as a door jamb. Somerset Museums Service have now been advised of their location.

Archive

The archive will be deposited with Wells Museum under the accession code 2005.29

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