

CPAT Report No 938

Village Workshops, Caersws, Powys

ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF



THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Report for Powys County Council




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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In June 2007 the Field Services Section of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) was invited by Powys County Council to provide a quotation for undertaking an archaeological watching brief during the construction of the new Village Workshops at Caersws, Powys. The area lies immediately to the south of the Caersws II Roman Fort, but has not been designated as a scheduled ancient monument. The watching brief had been recommended by Mr M Walters of the Curatorial Section of CPAT, acting as the archaeological curator, and is subject to a brief (CWAT 665) prepared by Mr Walters.
- 1.2 An archaeological evaluation of the site was undertaken by CPAT in August 2004, which revealed evidence of Roman occupation at varying depths below the existing ground level (Hankinson 2004). The evidence from the evaluation was taken into account when designing the new buildings, all of which were constructed on concrete rafts, avoiding any disturbance to archaeological levels. At meetings between CPAT, Powys County Council and the site contractors, Pave Aways Ltd, it was determined that archaeological deposits were only likely to be affected by the excavation of specific service trenches, and the watching brief was therefore arranged to monitor these works.

2 LOCATION, TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

- 2.1 The Village Workshops site is located close to the centre of Caersws (at NGR SO 03039189), immediately to the south-east of the B4569 Caersws-Llanidloes road, between its junction with the main A470 Trunk road and a level crossing where it meets the Central Wales railway line (Fig. 1).
- 2.2 Caersws lies on the valley floor of the River Severn, at the confluence of the river with its tributary streams of Afon Carno and Afon Cerist/Trannon. The area is relatively level and low-lying, varying in elevation between 120m OD and 125m OD.
- 2.3 The solid geology of the area consists of mudstones and siltstones belonging to the Telychian phase of the Llandovery Series of rocks, the earliest division of the Silurian era (1994 British Geological Survey map), although these rocks are locally overlain by fluvio-glacial silts and gravels of the Pleistocene era. The soils in the immediate area of the evaluation consist of fine loamy soils over gravel belonging to the Rheidol Association (1983 Soil Survey of England and Wales map).

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Caersws occupies a focal point in the system of Roman forts, controlling access to and from central Wales. As part of the early Roman campaigns a large auxiliary fort, Caersws I, was founded before AD 70 in a strongly defended position on a spur overlooking the River Severn, to the north-east of the present village. This fort was relatively short-lived and was replaced by a more permanent fort, Caersws II, during the 70s AD, which was situated on the flood plain near the confluence of the Severn and Carno. Caersws II has been the subject of a series of excavations, the results from which have suggested that the main phase of activity lasted until the late 2nd century AD and that by the early 3rd century the military tenure was effectively at an end, although some form of activity continued into the early 4th century (Jones 1993, 87).
- 3.2 A civilian settlement, or *vicus*, developed in association with Caersws II fort, and evidence from various excavations, geophysical survey and aerial reconnaissance suggests that it may

have covered an area of at least 7ha on the south and east side of the fort (Fig. 1). Excavations just outside the south gate of the fort in 1985-6 (Britnell 1989) identified part of a flourishing commercial centre, revealing timber buildings and associated finds suggesting a possible tavern, shops and metal working workshops (Fig. 1, 10). This commercial activity appears to have continued until the 130s AD, its decline possibly being associated with a withdrawal of troops to the northern frontier, as elsewhere in Wales (Jones 1993, 88).

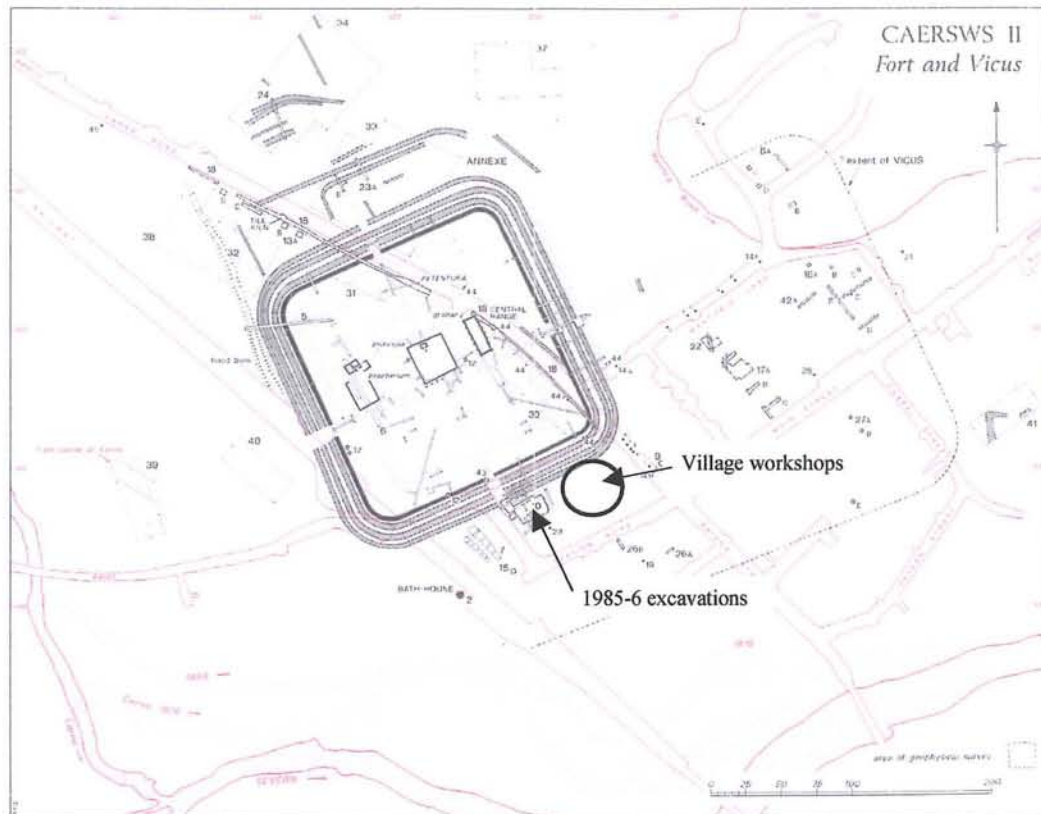


Fig. 1 Caersws Roman occupation and site location (after Jones 1993, Fig. 2)

- 3.3 The Village Workshops site is located within 50m of the south gate of the fort, close to the area excavated in 1985-6. The 2004 evaluation revealed a succession of layers from the later phases of Roman activity in Caersws. The main evidence of this activity consisted of a series of soil and stone layers, many of which had been cut by post-holes and similar features, including evidence of wall-lines relating to buildings of the Roman period, and the edge of the outermost of the three fort ditches (Hankinson 2004).

4 WATCHING BRIEF

- 4.1 The watching brief was undertaken during the excavation of two service trenches (Fig. 2), commencing with a drainage trench in May 2008, followed in June by a trench for the watermain. A written and photographic record was maintained during the watching brief and the site archive has been deposited with the regional Historic Environment Record, maintained by CPAT in Welshpool. Finds recovered during the watching brief will be deposited with the Powysland Museum in Welshpool in due course.

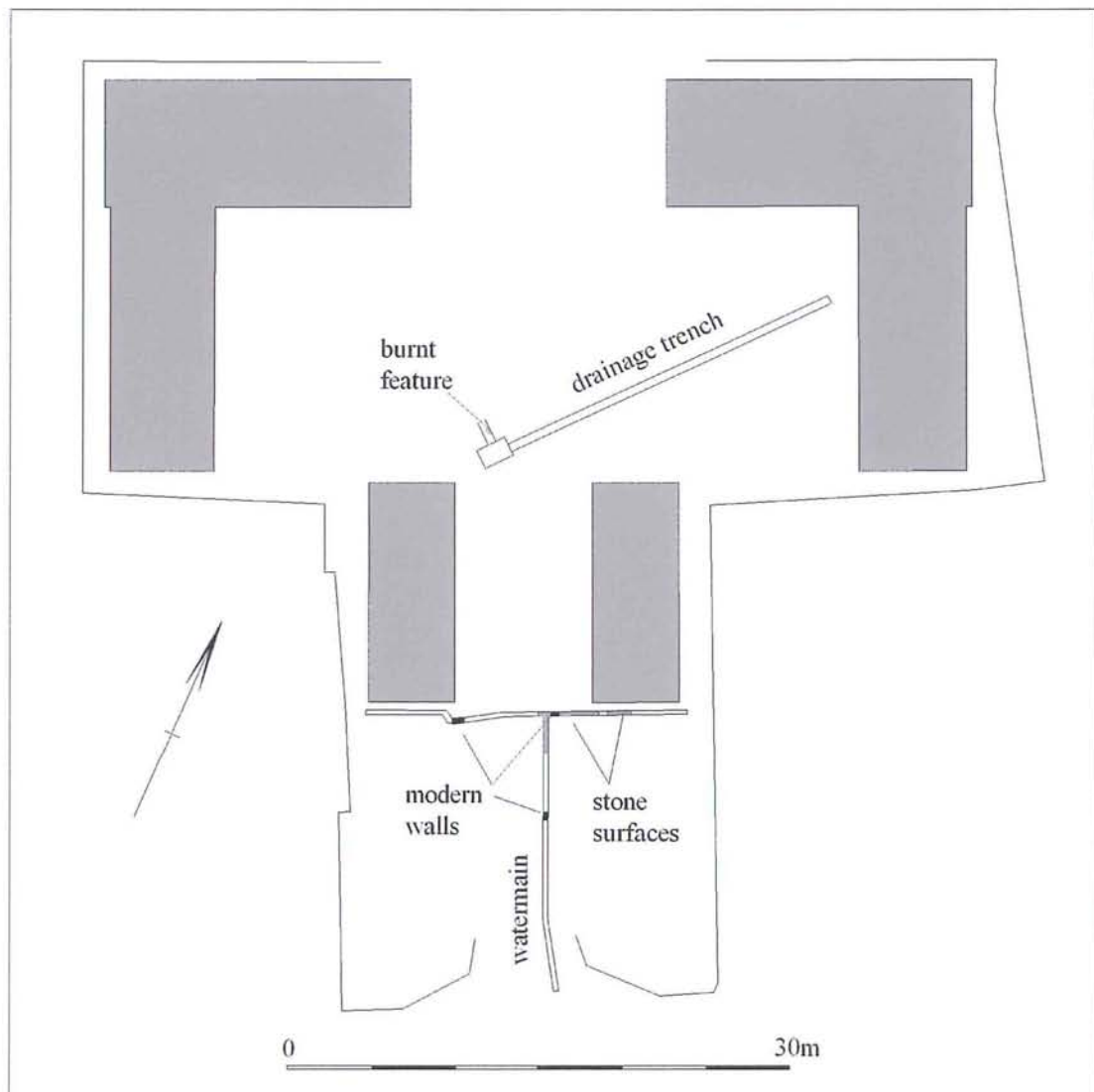


Fig. 2 Site plan showing location of trenches monitored during the watching brief

- 4.2 The watching brief for the drainage trench was conducted on 7-8 May 2008. Excavations for a manhole, some 2.0m by 1.4m and 1.35m deep, cut into approximately 0.35m of deposits associated with Roman activity. The upper Roman layer commenced about 1.0m below the existing ground surface and was composed of yellow mottled clay, 0.15m thick, capping a layer of reddish-brown clay silt, at least 0.2m in thickness, and comprising significant amounts of charcoal and burnt clay/daub. A trench, measuring 0.5m wide and between 1.0m and 0.6m deep, was also excavated to accept a drainage pipe heading from the north corner of the development area to the manhole. Several sherds of decorated Samian ware (Plate 3) were recovered from the junction between the two layers, approximately 2m to the north-

east of the manhole excavation, but for much of the length of the trench, no evidence of the Roman deposits was encountered, these lying at a greater depth than the base of the trench.



Plate 1 Area of burning revealed in the drainage trench

- 4.3 Immediately to the south-west of the manhole the trench revealed a layer of stiff yellow clay at a depth of 0.8m, beneath which was a band of charcoal overlying a layer of grey-brown silty clay. A feature was identified in the base of the trench, at a depth of 1.1m, comprising a roughly circular area of burning around 0.75m across, overlying a deposit of charcoal. The feature extended beyond the limits of the trench. Although the trench extended further to the south-west, its depth was insufficient to disturb archaeological deposits and the watching brief was not maintained further.
- 4.4 The excavations for the watermain were conducted on 18 June 2008 and comprised three sections of trench, the locations of which are indicated in Fig. 2. The trench measured 0.3m wide and generally varied in depth between 0.5m and 0.8m. The north-eastern section, along the end of one of the workshop units, revealed a series of Roman deposits. At around 3m from the south-east corner of the building a stone surface was identified at a depth of 0.75m, sealed beneath a layer of yellow clay, 0.1m thick. The stone surface extended south for around 1.5m at which point a further layer of yellow clay separated it from a second stone surface. A number of sherds of Roman pottery were recovered from above the surfaces, including a sherd of Dressel 20 amphora.



Plate 2 North-eastern section of the watermain trench showing stone surface

- 4.5 At a point 3m to the south-west of the building the stone, concrete and brick foundations for a wall were revealed, which necessitated a deepening of the trench to a depth of up to 1.2m. A similar foundation was identified in the south-western section of the trench, close to the north-east corner of another of the workshop units. This foundation was more substantial, however, and required a diversion of the trench, when continued along the eastern end of the building, becoming increasingly shallow, with no evidence of Roman deposits. The area between the two foundations had been infilled with brick rubble, beneath which the trench cut into a layer of yellow clay from which no finds were identified.
- 4.6 The south-eastern section of the trench connected the other two sections with watermain in Station Road. Further evidence was revealed for the stone surface identified in the north-eastern trench, which extended south-eastwards for 2.3m, at a depth of 0.8m, again overlain by yellow clay. At this point the stone was replaced by a layer of yellow-brown silty clay with charcoal flecks. After 6.3m further modern wall foundations were identified, again requiring a deepening of the trench. To the south-east of the foundations the trench was 0.75m deep, and cut into a layer of yellow clay at a depth of 0.65m. The section of the trench in the entrance splay leading into the workshops revealed Roman deposits at a depth of 0.5m, comprising mixed stoney clay from which a sherd of Black Burnished Ware was recovered.



Plate 3 Decorated Samian ware recovered from drainage trench

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The watching brief has confirmed the presence of Roman occupation deposits within the area, although the nature and scale of the excavations that were monitored limits any interpretation of the results. It is clear, however, that significant deposits exist in this part of Caersws which are presumably associated with the civilian settlement, or *vicus*, which is known to have existed outside the fort.
- 5.2 This deposits which were identified are consistent with the observations made during the evaluation of the area in 2004 and provide further evidence for buildings within this part of the *vicus*. In addition, the watching brief has revealed further stone surfaces which may be part of the internal road network within the Roman settlement, or perhaps yard surfaces associated with buildings.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 6.1 The writer would like to thank the following for their assistance during the project: Richard Hankinson, CPAT; Mr Tim Beach, Powys County Council; and Mr Dave Woodhouse, Pave Aways Ltd.

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