SUNKEN-FEATURED BUILDINGS ON
A LATE ROMANO-BRITISH
FARMSTEAD, RECTORY LANE,
APPLEBY MAGNA, LEICESTERSHIRE

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This paper presents the evidence for a number of sunken-featured buildings
dating to the Romano-British period, excavated in 1999 by the University of
Leicester Archaeological Services. These buildings formed part of a small,
fourth-century agricultural settlement, located at a site close to the village of
Appleby Magna. Structures of this type are more commonly associated with
Anglo-Saxon settlement from the fifth century onwards, but there is increasing
evidence to indicate an earlier origin for this building tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The period between AD 350 and 450 – the last years of Roman occupation and
the time when the first Anglo-Saxon arrivals took place – is arguably one of the
more obscure periods in British history. Evidence from the Leicestershire
countryside is particularly sparse, with much emphasis previously having been
placed on the investigation of high-status villa sites, at the expense of the
‘ordinary’ rural settlement, perhaps through issues of visibility (Taylor 2006,
140). An increase in fieldwork and a more systematic survey over the last 20 years
has begun to redress the balance somewhat (Liddle 2004, 71), although low-
status, rural Roman occupation sites are still very much under-represented in the
archaeological record.

In 1999 a programme of archaeological trial trenching, carried out by
University of Leicester Archaeological Services, revealed evidence of a small, late
Romano-British farmstead sited 0.8km north-west of the centre of the village of
Appleby Magna, adjacent to the Old Rectory, Rectory Lane, at National Grid
Reference SK 308 102 (Fig. 1). Appleby Magna is listed in the Domesday Survey
of 1086 and there are known medieval remains within the village core. Few
archaeological remains of Roman date have been located previously within the
general area, although this probably represents a lack of field-survey rather than a
true reflection of the pattern of Roman occupation. The site stood on level land,
c. 98m above Ordnance Datum, with an underlying geological substratum of
Mercia Mudstone. Work was carried out on behalf of JWA Architects and
Loangain Ltd, who proposed to construct a hotel on the 2.7-ha site. Geophysical
surveys undertaken prior to trenching had given largely negative results, and on
the basis of the evaluative fieldwork a decision was made by the Senior Planning Archaeologist at Leicestershire County Council to open up two areas for full excavation, each measuring 30m × 30m, to target the footprints of the proposed hotel building and car park. Both areas had been plough-eroded and were cut by furrows from medieval strip cultivation, aligned north-west to south-east. The full excavation report is available at the Leicestershire County Council Historic Environment Record (Clarke 2000).

RESULTS

Area 1, located in the southern part of the field, whilst not showing signs of having been densely occupied, revealed some intriguing structural evidence, indicating the remains of up to three sunkenfeatured buildings (grubenhauser) more commonly associated with the Anglo-Saxon period (Fig. 2). Two of the structures, SFB1 and
SFB2, were of similar form, each comprising a shallow, sub-rectangular pit measuring approximately 3m × 4m. Six post-holes were positioned around the southern half of SFB1, forming a semi-circle around the perimeter. Around the southern half of the perimeter of SFB2 were 13 square stake-holes, which may represent the remains of supports for a mud- or turf-walled superstructure. Each pit was filled with dark greyish-brown silty-clay and contained large quantities of pottery dating to the late fourth century AD. A bronze coin recovered from the fill of SFB1 was of the Emperor Magnentius, AD 350–53.

Other archaeological deposits associated with SFB1 include a pair of intersecting gullies, stratigraphically earlier than the pit, but also containing a large quantity of late Roman pottery. The first of these gullies was aligned north–south, extending beyond the southern edge of the excavation area and truncated to the north by a plough furrow, making no appearance on the ridge beyond. Adjoining this at right angles was a second gully, with a butt-end lying c. 1.5m away to the east. On the western side of SFB1, four further post-holes may have been associated with the first of the more obviously structural post-holes, creating a short east–west alignment. These were shallow, having been heavily truncated by a plough furrow, but did contain sherds of late Roman pottery.

A structural interpretation for the third group of deposits in the northern part of Area 1 is less obvious given the absence of associated post- or stake-holes, but may be inferred by activity elsewhere on the site. This too consisted of a sub-rectangular pit-type feature, SFB3, the main body of which measured 4.5m × 3m with an elongated ‘tail’ tapering off to the east measuring a further 3m in length. A shallow bowl-shaped depression within the base of the feature contained a compact layer of large cobbles interspersed with broken pottery. In total, 140 sherds of pottery were recovered, all dating to the late fourth century, with other finds including fragments of quern stone and a bronze coin of the Emperor Constantine I, dating from AD 307 to 337. Other associated features included a pair of parallel, linear gullies running from the western edge of SFB3 to the edge of the excavated area and a single post-hole on the northern side.

Area 2, located approximately 50m to the north of Area 1, contained a more dense scatter of archaeological deposits, which were harder to define having been heavily truncated by medieval plough furrows and surviving in isolated patches on the ridges in between. On the same east/west alignment as the furrows were three parallel, linear ditches, possibly representing Roman field boundaries (Fig. 3).

In the southern corner of the excavation area were the remains of another possible sunken-featured building, SFB4, similar in proportions to those seen in Area 1, although heavily truncated on the northern side by a plough furrow. The pit measured approximately 3m wide and was filled with dark, greyish brown silty clay, with finds including fourth-century pottery, fragments of tegula roof tile and a corroded iron knife blade. To the east of SFB4 was a sequence of shallow gullies, or beam slots, suggestive of a small, rectilinear structure (Group A). Parallel gullies were aligned east/west, measuring approximately 4m long and positioned 2m apart. At the eastern end of these and aligned at right-angles to them was a third gully, truncated both to the north and south by plough furrows. On the
northern side of the gullies were remains of a densely-packed cobbled surface. Finds from this group of features were scarce, with 25 sherds of pottery recovered in total, all dating to the fourth century. A spread of dark greyish brown material overlaying the gullies also contained sherds of fourth-century pottery, suggesting that the structure beneath may have been in use for a short period only.

Approximately 20m to the north, another area of activity (Group B, Fig. 4) appeared to be contained within an area defined by two of the Roman ditches, truncated to the north and south by plough furrows. Here, a sequence of gullies may have represented the remains of a second rectilinear building, constructed of timber, or mud, walling, although the plough truncation was such that a more precise form for the building could not be inferred. A scatter of pits and post-holes within the area defined by the gullies did not form any particular coherent structural patterning. All pottery recovered from the features could be dated to the fourth century and other finds included small quantities of iron slag, indicating the
presence of metal-working in the vicinity. Rather intriguingly the upper portion of a cattle cranium, complete with horns, appeared to have been placed at the intersection of two gullies. Its deposition appears to have been deliberate, apparently wedged in the base of the intersection, filling the space and facing upwards towards the east. Full analysis of the bone was impossible due to the decayed and fragmented nature of the remains. This presumed ritual deposition of cattle skulls within Romano-British contexts has been recorded elsewhere. A good local example of this was seen during recent excavations on the site of the former St Margaret’s swimming baths, Vaughan Way, Leicester, where a near-complete horned cattle skull was found at the base of a fourth-century property boundary ditch (Wooding forthcoming).

To the east of the gully sequence were the remains of a possible corn-drying oven or corn drier. This appeared as an elongated pit, measuring approximately 1.8m in length, with a bulbous northern end representing the remains of a stoking bowl which tapered off towards the south, representing the remains of a flue. Of the corn driers recorded in Britain, most have been located next to villa settlements and stone-built, aissled buildings of the third and fourth centuries (Morris 1979). Within Leicestershire and Rutland, corn driers have been found at Empingham, Ridlington, Ketton and Hamilton (Monckton 2004, 159), in addition to Roman villa sites at Great Casterton (Morris 1979) and Norfolk Street, Leicester (Lucas 1980, 83).
The corn drier here at Appleby Magna was of a simple, yet readily identifiable, form, and although no remains of a superstructure survived, there were signs of scorching to the surrounding natural clay. Environmental analysis of a burnt layer in the base of the pit revealed a high density of carbonised cereal grains, with high proportions of spelt and barley thought to represent the remains of wheat ‘spikelets’, the name given to the husked grains following initial threshing (Jarvis 2000). Spelt wheat is thought to have been the most common crop grown in Roman Britain, specifically cultivated for the purposes of bread-making, the different stages of which can sometimes be identified by the various waste residues resulting from each part of the process (Monckton 1995, 35). Following threshing to remove grains from their stalks, the resulting ‘spikelets’ were subject to further stages of parching and pounding, in order to free the grains from the husks, or ‘glumes’. The result would have then been fine-sieved to obtain the purified grain, leaving chaff and weed seeds as waste by-products. All of the environmental samples obtained from the archaeological deposits at Appleby Magna showed a predominance of chaff items, providing a good indication that crop processing had been carried out on site, with the fragments of quern stones recovered from SFBs 2, 3 and 4 indicating that this activity also extended to the milling of the grain to produce flour.

DISCUSSION

The archaeological evidence at Appleby Magna, although fragmentary, indicates small-scale agricultural activity perhaps serving the domestic requirements of a single farmstead, with small quantities of corn being refined and milled on a piecemeal basis according to the needs of the household, possibly associated with the low-status structures represented by SFBs 1, 2, 3 and 4. Cobbled surfaces associated with SFB3 and the possible Group A structure within Area 2 may represent the remains of threshing floors, although the initial threshing of corn is difficult to identify using environmental analysis, as the straw by-product of the process would have been removed for re-use elsewhere. The finds from the site give a very tight range of dates, indicating a settlement which spanned perhaps only one or two generations, before falling out of use during the latter part of the fourth century AD. The pottery suggests activity in the fourth century only, with the large quantities of pottery recovered from the SFBs indicating the second half of that century. Only small quantities of Derbyshire ware were recovered from across the site, reinforcing the AD 350+ date, as volume production of Derbyshire ware is thought to have ceased during the mid-fourth century (Martin unpublished; cited in Marsden 2000). The largest pottery group from the site was the grey wares, with copies of BB1 bead and flange dishes present in large numbers, possibly sourced from the Ravenstone kiln site 9.5km to the north-east. Regional imports, in lesser quantities, included colour-coated wares from the lower Nene Valley and Oxfordshire, along with mortaria from the Mancetter/ Hartshill production centres.

Figures 5 and 6 compare the forms of the sunken-featured buildings identified from Appleby Magna. Although structures of this type are more usually associated
with Anglo-Saxon culture from the fifth century onwards, there are several Romano-British examples of similar building-forms from across the country, most notably at Monkton on the Isle of Thanet in Kent (Bennet and Williams 1997) and at the Lower Terrace site on Tintagel Island in Cornwall (Harry 1994). Most of the known examples tend to be larger and more structurally elaborate than the more traditional Germanic *grubenhaus* form, and it has been argued that these represent an entirely different building tradition (Tipper 2004, 7). Two more examples of Romano-British sunken-featured buildings from recent excavations in Leicestershire support the evidence from Appleby M magna and may further our understanding of this subject. At Crown Hills in North Evington, Leicester, an SFB measuring 3.5m × 2.15m in area by 0.35m deep was found in association with a threshing floor and a corn-drying oven, all relating to a third- to fourth-century phase of activity (Chapman 2000, 25). At Grange Lane in Leicester, a second- to third-century SFB measuring 3.15m × 1.52m in area by 0.43m deep, with a good sequence of structural post-holes, was found adjacent to a stone-lined
corn-drying oven (Thomas forthcoming). These two structures, along with the examples from Appleby Magna, appear to have closer affinities with Anglo-Saxon type SFBs than with other Romano-British examples from elsewhere in the country. It is possible that the distinctive form of these structures may be more characteristic of a fourth-century Roman settlement than previously has been thought, reinforcing suggestions of an overlap in cultural traditions between the fourth and sixth centuries, blurring perhaps the distinction between Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon rural settlements in this region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Analysis of the environmental remains from Appleby Magna was carried out by Wayne Jarvis under the supervision of Angela Monkton. The faunal remains were examined by Jen Browning, the pottery by Patrick Marsden and the metalwork finds by Martin Shore. The project was managed by Patrick Clay. I want to thank Jeremy Taylor and John Thomas for their assistance in the production of this paper.

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