

ANOTHER ROMAN BUILDING AT WYMBUSH, MILTON KEYNES

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A watching brief on a large construction site in 1988 revealed further evidence of a small Roman farmstead, excavated in 1979. Two structures were examined, providing new evidence relating to the duration and extent of the site.

The site at Wymbush is situated in the area of Milton Keynes bearing that name, an industrial zone alongside the new A5(T), about 1.5 km south of Wolverton (Fig. 1). Wymbush is located on a gentle east-facing slope in the Loughton Valley, the archaeological site itself being about 150 m west of Loughton Brook, at an elevation of 74 m OD (NGR SP8285 3893). The site was discovered in 1973 as a plough scatter of Roman pottery and building materials, and excavated for the Milton Keynes Archaeology Unit in 1979 under the direction of the writer. The results of these excavations have since been published (Mynard 1987, 82–90), the site number being MK211 (CAS 3211).

Although during the process of preparing the site for publication it became apparent that the excavation had not revealed the full extent of the site, the Unit's excavation programme in subsequent seasons did not permit further investigation there, and the policy was adopted of maintaining a watching brief when construction work began on the site. This was the course of action taken when development by John Laing commenced in July 1988. Unfortunately, owing to the construction methods adopted, much of the site was stripped of topsoil and immediately covered by the compacted shale base of the building, and it was only on the north-west side of the site that sufficient time was made available for more detailed archaeological investigation. Over a period of three days, an area of about 1000 m² was stripped of topsoil, cleaned and planned, and all the features within it were sampled. This area, containing evidence of two

Roman buildings, lay about 70 m north of the structures excavated in 1979, and appeared to mark the northern extremity of the site. Although the discovery of further buildings in the intervening areas was reported by the contractors, the speed of construction made it impossible to record them.

Evidence from this salvage excavation suggests that human activity on this part of the site can be divided into two phases (Fig. 2). As the second phase corresponds to the first of those found in 1979, the first phase from 1988 is designated as Phase O.

Phase O: Early–Late Second Century

This period is represented by gully 109, its associated group of postholes (110–14, 130–2), pit 116 and posthole 129.

109. Gully, U-section, 650 mm wide and 300 mm deep, aligned NW/SE. At its south end, appeared to turn at right angles to NE, in which direction it continued for 3.2 m. Cut by SW and SE walls of stone structure (Bldg 3).

110–114, 130–2. Group of postholes, each 350–450 mm square and 140–340 mm deep, some with evidence of stone packing still in situ. 110, 111, 113, 114, 130, are set in a line parallel with and 1.2 m to the north of gully 109, while 131 and 132 curve north-eastwards, to avoid the angled end of 109. 112 is set against the south side of 111, suggesting it carried a replacement post or reinforcing timber.

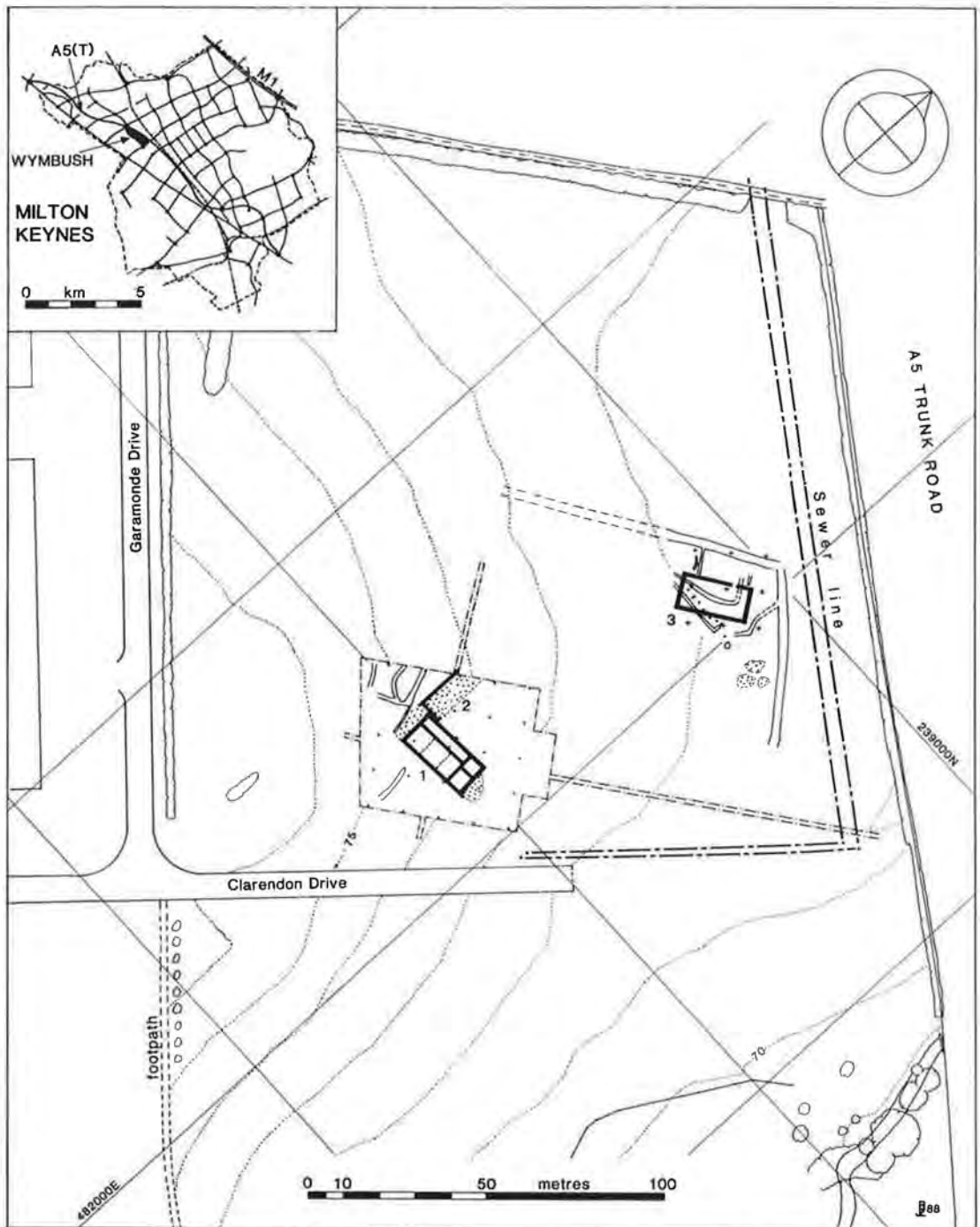


Fig. 1. Overall plan of Wymbush Roman site, showing relationship of 1979 and 1988 discoveries.

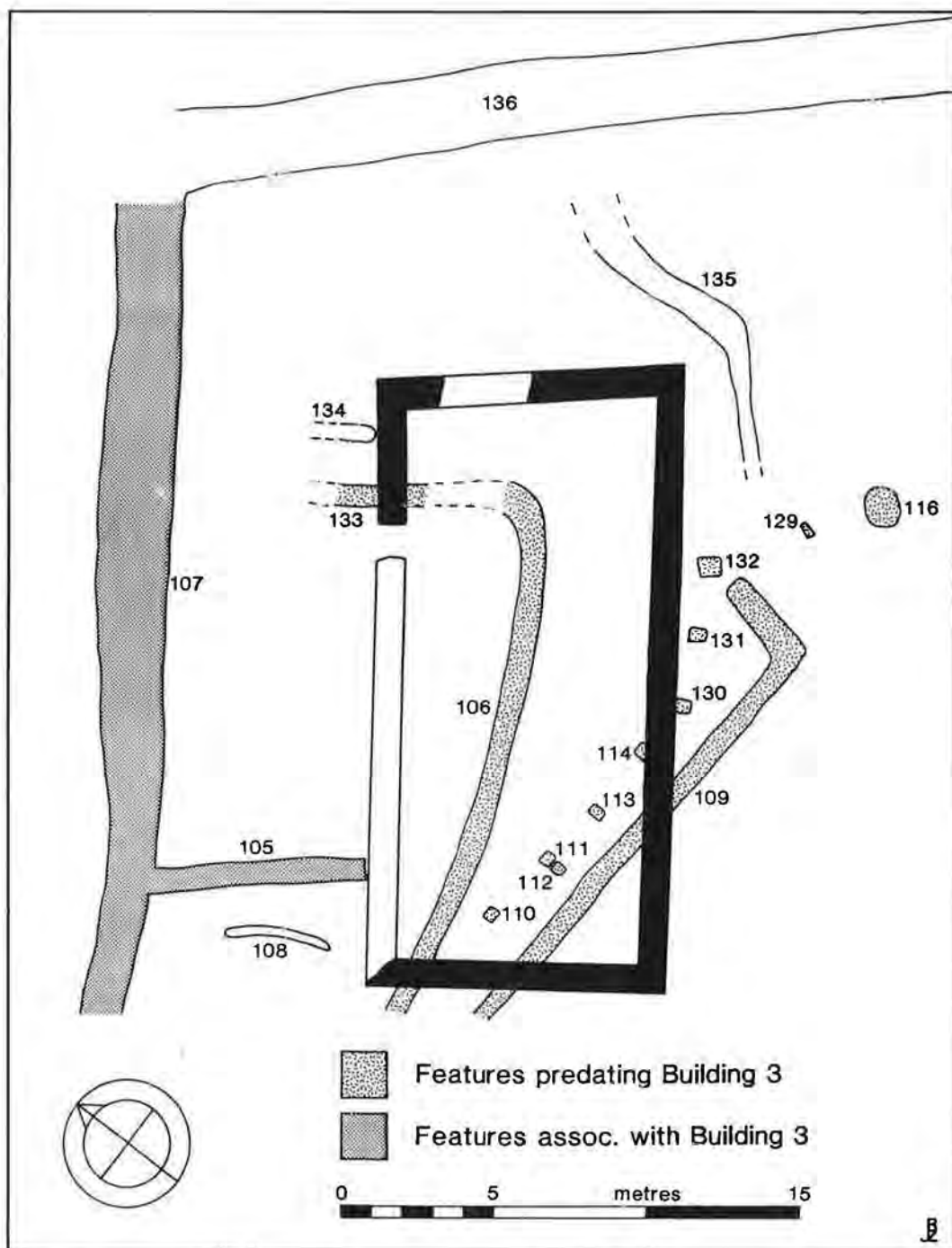


Fig. 2. Plan of 1988 excavation, showing phases of occupation.

116. Pit, circular, 1.25 m in diameter and 80 mm deep, filled with a dark grey gritty soil containing much charcoal, situated 5 m east of 109.

129. Posthole, 450–250 mm, and 90 mm deep, located midway between pit 116 and posthole 132. From its differing outline and depth, and the fact that it does not continue the line of the posthole group described above, this is probably not connected with them.

Phase I: Late Second–Late Third Century

This period covers the construction and use of the stone structure, Building 3, and the cutting of ditches 105 and 107.

Building 3 was a substantial stone structure measuring 20.5½10 m, aligned SW/NE. Of its walls only the footings, consisting of a double layer of pitched limestone 850–900 mm wide, survived, except along much of the NW wall, which had been damaged by ridge and furrow ploughing. The interior floor was apparently of beaten earth, overlying many of the Phase I features. There was a break in the footings of the NW wall, 1 m wide and 4.8 m from the north corner; it is not certain whether this was caused by plough damage, or intentionally left by the builders.

107. A broad V-section ditch, 2 m wide and 750 mm deep, aligned SW/NE, running parallel with the NW wall of Building 3, at a distance of 7 m. This feature was traced for a distance of 27 m in the excavated area, and could be seen as a depression running across the stripped area to the west of Building 3 for perhaps another 40–50 m. 9 m north of the building, it appeared to turn almost at right angles to the south-east (136), though this was never confirmed by excavation owing to the proximity of a main sewer line (see Fig. 1).

105. Ditch, rounded V-section, 700 mm wide and 250 mm deep, aligned NW/SE, between NE wall of Building 3 and ditch 107, which it runs into. Contained much building debris (mortar, limestone and tile fragments).

Undated Features

106. Gully, shallow U-section, 700 mm wide and 250 mm deep, aligned WSW/ENE across interior of Building 3, the SW wall of which cuts it. At its east end, 2.5 m from the SE wall of the building, it appears to turn north-eastwards towards gully 133, possibly joining it, though ridge and furrow ploughing had obliterated any trace of a junction. Produced no finds, though obviously predated Building 3.

108. Shallow curving gully, aligned NW/SE, to NW of west corner of Building 3, 3.4 m in length, 300 mm wide, and 50 mm deep. Produced no finds.

133. Gully, 700 mm wide and 250 mm deep, cut by NW wall of Building 3. Possibly joins 106 to SE; course to NW obliterated by plough furrow. Produced no finds.

134. Gully, 550 mm wide and 300 mm deep aligned NW/SE, butting NW wall of Building 3. Course to NW obliterated by plough furrow. Produced no finds.

135. Sinuous, rather amorphous gully close to east corner of Building 3. About 1.1 m wide and 250 mm deep. Produced no finds.

Discussion

Before discussing the evidence, it will be useful to look back on the results of the 1979 Wymbush excavations. The two structures examined at that time (Buildings 1 and 2) consisted of a stone house of cottage type, measuring 17¾47.8 m, aligned west–east and facing north, with an open-fronted barn, at least 18 m in length, to the north-west of it. These structures both dated from the late second to early third century. Later in the third century the house was enlarged by the addition of two rooms at its east end, and a corridor along its north side. Both buildings were abandoned in the late third century, though there is evidence of sporadic activity on the site during the fourth century, including the burial of a hoard of 21 bronze coins, dating from 330–49, in a ditch to the west of the house.

Comparing the above with the new evidence available for the site, two points spring immediately to notice. The first is that we can now make some judgement as to the physical limits of occupation at Wymbush, at least to the north and east sides of the site, which appear to be marked by ditches 107 and 136 respectively. Ditch 107 was of appreciably larger section than any other features excavated at Wymbush, and was traced for a total distance of nearly 80 m from its junction with ditch 136. In the recent work on the site, it was noted that there were no features to the north of 107, a further pointer to its function as a boundary. This means that the late second-century establishment at Wymbush stood in a ditched enclosure perhaps 100–120 m square, with the house at its south corner, and farm buildings ranged over the remaining area down the slope towards Loughton Brook. It is unfortunate that circumstances did not permit the recording of the buildings which stood in the area between Buildings 1 and 3.

The second point is that (as noted above) the second phase of the most recent excavation corresponds exactly to Phase I of the previously published report. The Roman site at Wymbush can now be seen as an early, rather than late, second-century foundation, with a period of restructuring and improvement in the late second century. This course of development is paralleled at the villa at Stantonbury, Milton Keynes, excavated by the writer (Mynard 1987, 97–104), where circular stone buildings of the early second century were replaced by a walled farmyard and a substantial stone structure, possibly a granary, in the late second century.

What is particularly interesting at Wymbush is the nature of this early second-century phase, in that it appears to be represented by a rectangular timber structure, possibly an aisled building, one side of which is formed by gully 109 and its associated posthole alignment. The absence of the north side of this structure can be accounted for by the presence of a medieval plough furrow to the north of Gully 106, of a sufficient depth to destroy much of the NE wall of Building 3.

The length of the structure, at least 16 m, is

comparable with similar buildings at Bignor, Knowl Hill, and Cefngraeanog (Morris 1979, figs 35–6). Morris suggests a width range for such structures of 5–7 m, based on the lengths of suitable timber generally available (1979, 64). Although recent excavations at the nearby Bancroft villa have produced evidence of two aisled buildings, both roughly contemporary with the Wymbush example, both are much larger, with circular stone-packed aisle posts and substantial stone wall-footings (Zeepvat 1984 and 1985). Such structures are by no means uncommon in the east Midlands, though most are of the more developed type found at Bancroft. The Wymbush building is certainly the first aisled building of this date, made wholly of timber, to be found in the upper Ouse valley.

One other interesting point worth noting is the various alignments of the buildings and major features. The aisled building, aligned west–east, is similarly aligned to the later house (Bldg 1), while Building 2 lies at right angles to the latter. However, neither Building 1 nor Building 2 is aligned with the contemporary Building 3, or with enclosure ditch 107, where in both cases the alignment has shifted some 45°, to a SW/NE axis. One possible explanation for this is as follows:

1. The aisled building was constructed with its major axis following the contours, to minimize groundworks.

2. The first stone structure to be built was the house, Building 1, which followed the alignment of standing timber structures, rather than the lie of the land, which placed the building at 45° to the contours.

3. The enclosure surrounding the farm was delineated by a ditch. This of necessity was placed approximately square to the contours of the site, and therefore out of alignment with Building 1. Other buildings were probably aligned with the enclosure rather than the contours.

Whatever the true explanation for the change in building alignment at Wymbush, its existence is worth noting simply because, in the Roman

period, it is unusual. At Bancroft, for instance, all the buildings, of whatever date, keep to either west-east or north-south alignments, exhibiting a neatness of layout that is typically Roman, unlike Wymbush. However, sites of the order of Wymbush are less well known because fewer have been excavated (perhaps owing to their smaller size), so perhaps such un-Roman untidiness is more common than we might suppose.

Acknowledgements

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