An Archaeological Watching Brief on the Eagle Tavern to Wicker Hall Pipeline near Royston, Hertfordshire.
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF ON
THE
EAGLE TAVERN TO WICKER HALL PIPELINE,
NEAR ROYSTON, HERTFORDSHIRE.

by
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and

Commissioned by Lee Valley Water Plc

North Hertfordshire District Council Museums
Field Archaeology Section
Department of Engineering and Leisure Services
November 1991
THE EAGLE TAVERN TO WICKER HALL
PIPELINE

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Figure 1: Location Plan of Water Pipeline ........................................ p.3

NB. The views expressed in this report are those of the author, who takes full responsibility for them. They are not necessarily the views of the North Hertfordshire District Council.
1. Introduction & Archaeological Background

1.1 From mid-December 1990 to mid-March 1991 the Field Archaeology Section of the North Hertfordshire District Council monitored the laying of a water pipeline being undertaken by Lee Valley Water Plc who commissioned the archaeological survey.

1.2 The rising main was to be inserted between the Eagle Tavern boreholes located on the B1039 to the south east of Royston, and the covered reservoir at Wicker Hall on the edge of Therfield Heath west of Royston Hospital. The pipeline's route mainly followed established hedgerows and tracks passing south of New Stud Farm and Half Moon Hill and crossing the A10 road at Fox Farm, then cutting across open fields toward the reservoir, a distance of approximately 3 km.

1.3 It was observed, before the groundworks began, that the route traversed the chalk ridge of north-east Hertfordshire, an area of high archaeological potential. The Wicker Hall reservoir is situated on the edge of Therfield Heath, the most important surviving prehistoric landscape of the region. It also crossed the A10, which follows the line of a Roman road known as Ermine Street. Immediately to the west of this road the pipeline was to impinge upon the south-west corner of Area of Archaeological Importance (A.A.I. No.55, as defined in the North Hertfordshire District Local Plan Review). This area includes the remains of at least one prehistoric burial mound and it is probable that other such features lie within its limits.

1.4 Due to the density and variety of sites in the vicinity, it was decided that the entire route of the pipeline should be observed and recorded where necessary. This high potential, especially for prehistoric features, is not unusual within this area; indeed, the North Hertfordshire district contains approximately one third of the Country's recorded archaeological sites.

1.5 The archaeological features in the vicinity are mainly burial mounds and ditches associated with probable settlements (see fig.1). These have been identified either through fieldwork or from aerial photographs. It appears that there may be as many ancient burial mounds per square mile in this district as in the more celebrated archaeological landscapes of Wiltshire, Wessex and Yorkshire.

1.6 A major site is that of Whiteley Hill which is located to the south of the Eagle Tavern boreholes and consists of a double ditched enclosure (scheduled Monument No.101) and a total of six ring ditches, which are the remains of ploughed-out burial mounds, extending northwards up to Heath Farm.

1.7 Similar ring ditches have been identified near Mile End Farm together with enclosure ditches and a field system of probable prehistoric or Roman-British date. Aerial photographs reveal a rectangular enclosure containing a ring ditch at Burtoes Farm to the north of the pipeline route, on the edge of Royston, and another ploughed-out burial mound just south-west of Flint Hall. (Herts County Council Sites and Monuments Record [SMR] Nos.2567 and 2568).

1.8 At Fox Farm the pipeline crossed the A10 which follows the route of Ermine Street; a road of Roman origin which once linked the capital of Londinium with the north. This feature attests to the occupation of this area during the Roman period, although as yet no roadside settlements are known in the immediate vicinity.

1.9 To the west of the A10 the pipeline ran toward the Wicker Hall reservoir on the edge of Therfield Heath. This is the only surviving area of downland, occupying the chalk escarpment, which originally extended both to the east and west of Royston. At the foot of this escarpment runs the Icknield Way, a prehistoric trackway which once extended from Wessex to East Anglia, and was presumably a line of communication and trade between these two centres of prehistoric culture. A number of well preserved burial mounds (SMR Nos.17 and 97) occupy the top of the scarp, taking advantage of the prominent location above this important routeway. These are mostly round barrows of Bronze Age date (2200-700BC). The exception is a long barrow dated to the Neolithic period (4000-2200BC) which is the oldest standing monument in Hertfordshire. These burial mounds are evidently the product of prehistoric settlement in the area, and may have been purposely sited alongside the Icknield Way in a place of prominence, so that users of the route could 'appreciate' them and perhaps use them to take their bearings. Their presence suggests that the Icknield Way was already well established by the Bronze Age, if not by the Neolithic period. The barrows may have acted as markers along this route, the tribesmen defining the limits of their territorial boundaries with the resting places of their dead ancestors.

1.10 The impact of Medieval and later settlement is even greater across the landscape through which the pipeline was laid. The modern fields still contain areas of ridge and furrow, a corrugated effect on their surfaces created by continued strip cultivation. The
surrounding towns and villages of Royston, Bailey, Reed and Therfield were all occupied by the Medieval period as is evidenced by the foundation dates for their parish churches, mostly 14th century or earlier, and by the sites of Norman fortifications such as the motte and bailey castle at Therfield.

2. Methodology

2.1 In agreement with Lee Valley Water PLC it was decided, in the light of the information outlined above, that archaeological coverage of the pipeline construction work was necessary. The Field Archaeology Team undertook a programme of monitoring the excavations, which were carried out by the contractors, Biggs Wall Construction Ltd. Initially this involved the daily inspection of the easement created by topsoil stripping, in order to identify any features which might appear on the cleaned surface of the subsoil. Further monitoring of the machine-cut pipe-trench followed to ensure the identification of any features revealed in its sections.

2.2 In the event of these works uncovering archaeological features, such as ditches, pits or even walls they were to be recorded by means of scale drawings in both plan and section. Detailed written records and a photographic archive were to be maintained. Evidence of their date and function, in the form of artefacts such as worked flints, pottery and bone, were to be retrieved without further excavation of these features.

3. Results

2.3 In this way it was intended that any sites of archaeological significance would be recorded in the field as quickly and as efficiently as possible. The resulting information would then be used to extend the knowledge and understanding of prehistoric and historic land use in this area of North Hertfordshire.

3.1 While the pipeline route was seen to pass close-by known archaeological sites, especially in the vicinity of Heath Farm and between Eagle Tavern and the waste main (where it actually runs between the remains of three burial mounds); no further sites were identified during the ground works. However a number of struck flint flake cores, the waste generated during the creation of stone tools, were collected from the topsoil upcast. These certainly indicate that the area was inhabited by prehistoric peoples although their settlements may lie elsewhere, perhaps located closer to some of the sites already discussed above. The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) compiled and maintained by the County Council contains many more references to chance finds of prehistoric dates such as flint tools, bronze axes and even a bone harpoon discovered within the surrounding area.

3.2 These chance finds are not limited to the prehistoric period, for example the SMR also records the findings of medieval brooches, silver pennies dated to the reign of Henry II and Anglo-Saxon and later Medieval inhumations in a cemetery located along Briary Lane on the edge of Therfield Heath (SMR No.1738). Along the pipeline the finds of historic date were mainly fragments of tile and pottery scattered across the surface of the fields, though the remains of a sheep skeleton were found in the pipe-trench section along the works between the Eagle Tavern boreholes and the waste main at the east end of the route. It was apparently purposely buried in a shallow cut and was perhaps a diseased animal of probable post-medieval date. It was therefore left in situ.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Despite a thorough investigation no significant remains were found within the confines of the water pipe trench or the working easement. However given the large number of archaeological sites known to survive in the vicinity (as outlined in the introduction to this report) there can be no doubt regarding the necessity of the monitoring operation. It is surprising that no prehistoric or medieval features were encountered, perhaps this fact endorses the planning procedures which enabled the route to be diverted around the most sensitive archaeological sites.

4.2 It has been found elsewhere in North Hertfordshire that evidence of early settlement which is
Eagle Tavern to Wicker Hall Pipeline near Royston, Hertfordshire. 1991
visible from the air, can be difficult to identify on the ground. The number of burial sites mentioned in the introduction must imply that the landscape was occupied and farmed in the prehistoric period; yet it would appear that these farmers generally reserved their monumental efforts for the dead, whilst the living were content to dwell in far less substantial constructions. These rarely survive the ravages of several thousand years of subsequent land use, and modern plough damage inflicted through the thin topsoil of the locality.

4.3 However there are certain archaeological features, notably deep ditches and pits, which would have been noticeable in the pipeline workings had they been present. The absence of these features provides us with valuable negative evidence, particularly with regard to the location and orientation of major Iron Age boundary ditches which are known to exist in this area. Consequently, the information gained during this project has provided a worthwhile addition to our understanding of the early history of the area.

Acknowledgements

The North Hertfordshire Field Archaeology Section would like to thank Lee Valley Water Plc for their funding of the pipeline monitoring project and Biggs Wall for their cooperation throughout.

Thanks are also due to the following staff for their assistance in the field: Christine Colley, Helen Mikolajczyk, Tony Offord and Dave Wren.

The supervision of the fieldwork and the production of this report was undertaken by Mark Atkinson; Assistant Supervisor with the North Hertfordshire Field Archaeology Section. Cover contour plan from Stevenson, M D, Bronze Age Burial Deposits in the Royston Area, Hertfordshire Archaeology; 9, 8-14 and the pull-out location plan by Faith Pewtress, Archaeological Assistant.